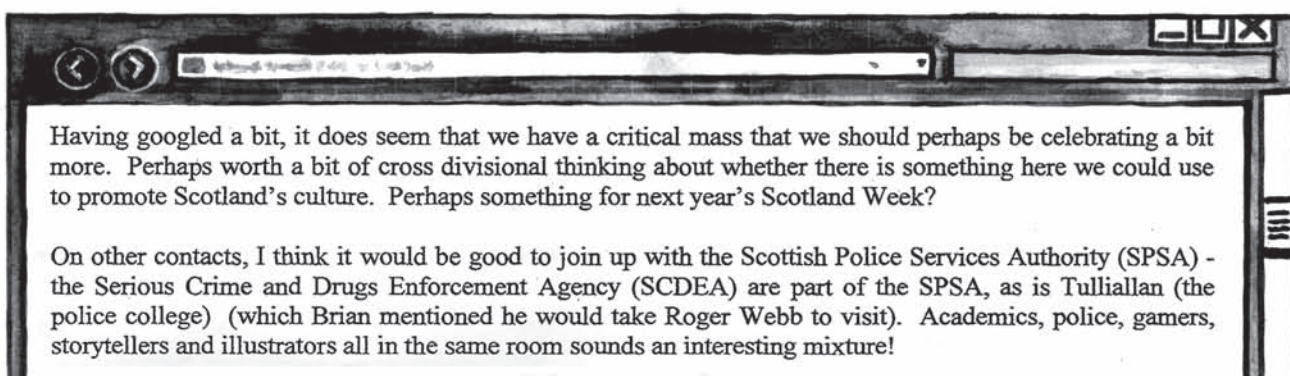
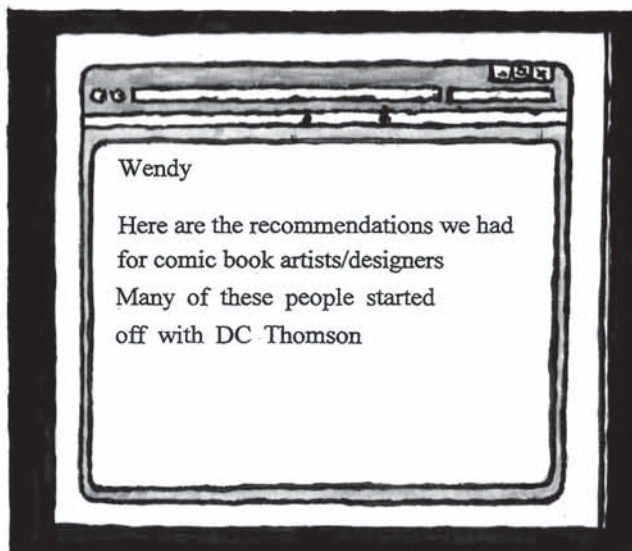


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Affect & the Politics of Austerity

An interview exchange with Lauren Berlant

Gesa Helms, Marina Vishmidt, Lauren Berlant

The political climate in the UK, given as it already was to the emotive and nationalist tropes of the War on Terror, found a new affective register with the financial crisis: the invocation of public and personal shame. Admittedly, shame and other moralized negativity has been never far from the national imagination. Some recognizable examples would be the Victorian marking of deserving and undeserving poor, the various moral panics of youth deviancy or the influence of communitarian authoritarianism on New Labour social policy.

Yet, as the banks were folding it was neither single mothers nor young NEETs (not in employment, education or training) in black hoodies that were the object of the public's rage but the profession which continues to operate as the nerve centre of the UK economy: the bankers. Amidst calls for public apologies, financial business practices were re-cast as the reckless activity of individual 'banksters'. Suddenly it seemed that the whole celebrated financial industry, the backbone of London's economy, and thus of the UK as a whole, had been driven into the ground by deviant individuals frenzied by 'perverse incentives', a 'bonus culture' of greed, ambition and excess. Thatcher-era cultural anxieties about 'City boys' resurfaced with a vengeance but with little of the class politics.

Two years on, we can see how much of this outcry by politicians has not led to a stronger regulation of banking practices, but that indeed it amounted to little more than a public shaming of the appetites of bankers; an appeal to conduct their business a bit more privately, not quite so visibly. The lack of any change was re-channelled into a call upon the decency of middle England to sacrifice for the national good and to direct their anger downwards on those who exploit the public without 'creating wealth': people who flout the norms through an 'excess of dependence', those who regard "benefits as a lifestyle choice" (Conservative Chancellor George Osborne, interview 9th September 2010)¹. Their 'shameless' milking of state benefits allows them to live in areas of Central London which low-paid workers can't afford, and their reckless personal habits burden our cash-strapped public services.

Little of this is new if we look back across UK politics of the last 30 years but also if we look across to elsewhere in Europe or North America. However, as part of various discussions on how to organize and intervene, we felt it was important to consider more carefully the affective register that is so forcefully called upon. A register that talks of shame and excess outlined against an assumed notion of a common-sense decency still to be found in the working-class heartlands and which, so some argue, can be mobilized as part of a progressive politics. With these questions in mind, we approached Lauren Berlant. Berlant teaches English at the University of Chicago and is a cultural theorist whose work – informed by influences that range over psychoanalysis, queer and feminist theory, as well as anarchist and autonomist politics – has over the years provided a remarkably sharp and nuanced analysis of the relationship between 'cultures of affect' and social structures. This interview exchange was conducted over several weeks in writing.

MV: Looking at the role of shame and shaming in creating a post-crisis culture and a public consensus, we are interested in how assumptions and norms using the language of personal responsibility shape the political discourse of 'austerity'. There is a sense that such language acts conservatively in how social and economic problems are conceived, including their causes and solutions, that it both permits and excludes certain types of policy approaches and certain types of defenses and criticisms of those policies. The relationship between shame and indebtedness is a major example, how the link of credit to credibility becomes a cipher for all kinds of social violence.²

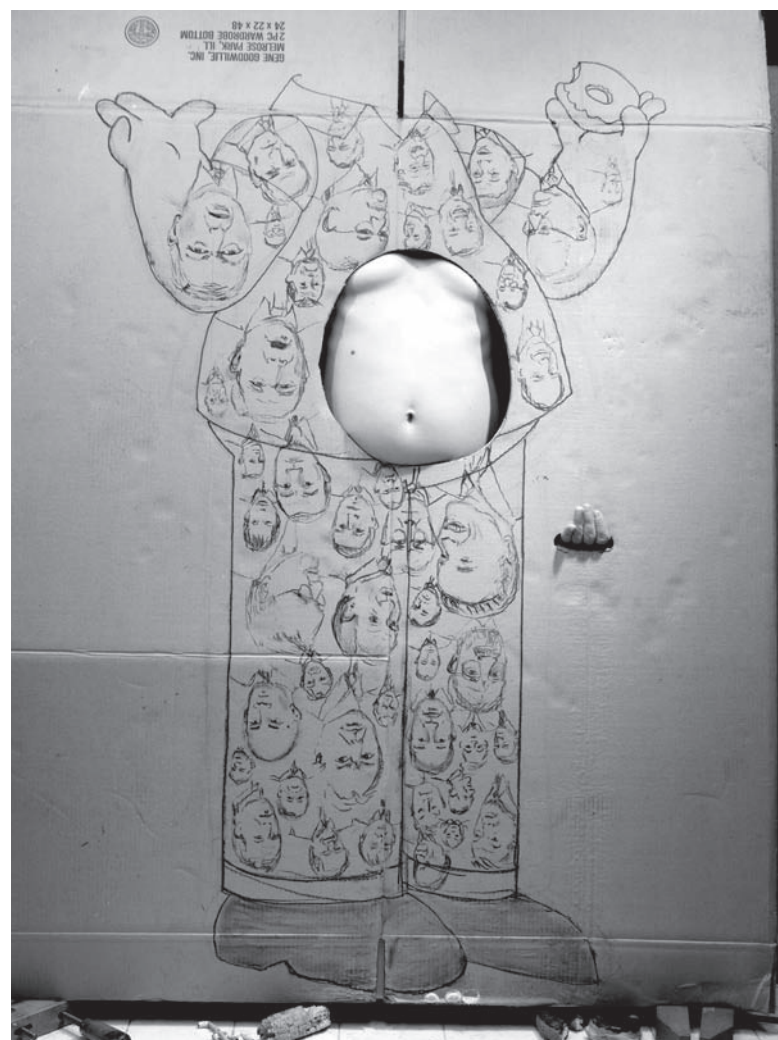
On the other hand, the unstable affect of

shame can also have more radical implications, as with your discussion of the difference between structures and experience of shame³: for example, shame can also be an affect underlying desires for social justice or solidarity: as Mario Tronti said⁴, we have to start with disgust at the way things are before we move on to imagining how we'd like them to be. There is a modality of excess to shame which means its deployment in political rhetoric is just as likely to turn on its handler as on its object – as in all moralistic or moralizing discourse. Is it the difference between individualizing shame or collective shame?

Thus for background. Our question here would be how you would relate the distinction you have made between the structures and experience of shame to the concrete political moment of building a consensus around intensified neoliberal policies in the wake of the financial crash?

LB: Polly Toynbee wrote a great sentence about the savage cuts of the new austerity: "The price of everything was laid out, but not the value of anything about to be destroyed."⁵ What does it mean for a symbolic relation to be too expensive, an unbearable burden? The image of the good life is too dear; something has to be sacrificed. The attempt to associate democracy with austerity – a state of liquidity being dried out, the way wine dries out a tongue – is fundamentally anti-democratic. The demand for the people's austerity hides processes of the uneven distribution of risk and vulnerability. Democracy is supposed to hold out for the equal distribution of sovereignty and risk. Still, austerity sounds good, clean, ascetic: the lines of austerity are drawn round a polis to incite it toward askesis, toward managing its appetites and taking satisfaction in a self-management in whose mirror of performance it can feel proud and superior. In capitalist logics of askesis, the workers' obligation is to be more rational than the system, and their recompense is to be held in a sense of pride at surviving the scene of their own attrition.

This looming overpresence of risk and the leeching out of even the phantasm of sovereignty across nations and persons translates into such a complex assemblage. Under the current conditions of debt and exposure, nation-states can't bear to admit their abjection, can't bear that they have become mere supplicants for the wealth that they have allowed to become privately held on behalf of a spectral growth on whose tithing the state has come to depend. The Euro-American state is a cowardly lion, a weeping bully, a plaintive lover to finance capital. It cannot bear to admit that, having grown its own administrative limbs to serve at the pleasure of the new sovereign of privatized wealth, that the wealthy feel no obligation to feed the state. So the state bails out banks and tells the polis to tighten up, claiming that the people are too expensive to be borne through their state, which can no longer afford their appetite for risk. They are told that they should feel shame for having wanted more than they could bear responsibility for and are told that they should take satisfaction in ratcheting down their image of the good life and the pleasures to be had in the process of its production. The affective orchestration of the crisis has required blaming the vulnerable for feeling vulnerable; not due only to a general precarity but also to the political fact that there is no longer an infrastructure for holding the public as a public. The public must become entrepreneurial individuals. All of the strikes and tea parties in response to the state's demand for an austere sacrifice under the burden of shame tell us that this incitement for the public to become archaic as a public is not going down too easily.



The big question is whether the popular culture of a "civil society" unwilling to let go of the collective good life fantasy secured by a beneficent state can mobilize its assertion of its priority over market democracy in a way that can fundamentally restructure the state's adjudication of capital, and meanwhile avoid fascism. But this is hard too. We remember that the bubble associating economic growth with civil rights of the last sixty years or so is an anomaly in world history. Besides that, though, the demands of the present mean protesting not only the state's servility to capital but people's very own fantasies of the good life. Just as the relations of the market to the state are fraying and changing, so too the destruction and elaboration of fantasy in relation to what a life is and what a good life is will need to shift about and reknit. The response to a potentially radical reconstruction of the conditions of the reproduction of life ought to be very demanding on everyone, including the resisters. At the moment most resisters are protesting state/capital but not protesting themselves. Without accommodating the affective demands for adjustment to the austere ordinary with which they're being confronted, people need to think about what kinds of good life might better be associated with flourishing, and fight that battle (with fantasy, politically) too.

That which is unbearable

MV: I am interested in the point you make about responding to the imposition of austerity by reconstructing what counts as good life, and how that relates to the 'shaming of the appetites' which legitimates, as well as provides libidinal satisfaction, to the non-negotiable imperatives of austerity. What forms of social action or structures of feeling do you think it would take for such attempts at reconstruction to rebut this kind of shame, as it were, with another vision of life rather than adopting shame as a purgative

*Appetites/
Sovereignty*
Claire Pentecost
(2003)



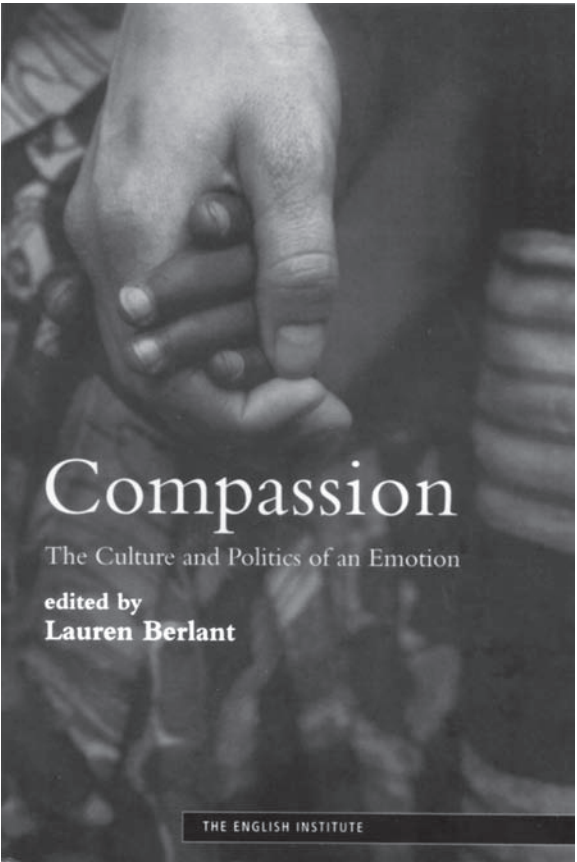
and adapting this vision to the lineaments of austerity? I guess this goes back to the political desires or objectives of the mobilization of shame. Can we programmatically or analytically separate adapting to ‘objectively less’ from ‘protesting yourself’, and how?

A smaller follow-up question concerns what you say about the Tea Party being a sign of the public refusing to be individualized, which could be interesting to discuss more since obviously there’s a lot of contradictions in what emanates from those groups, and many might think they actually represent a hyper-individualized and libertarian impulse rather than a belief in the public.

LB: The Tea-Partiers are a complex phenomenon, a teratoma of libertarian resistance to the state as well as state actors who are funding and publicizing the new patriotism of fierce nostalgia for a time when one could make a decent living, a living that allowed trust in the continuity of life rather than the constant entrepreneurialism or on-the-make-ness that now links all workers affectively with subproletarian populations at the level of insecurity about the reproduction of life. Everyone’s now a hustler: what varies is the verge and the risk. What used to be an exceptional form of subjectivity related to informal economies now pervades the officialized ones.

The Tea-Partiers do see themselves as a group of individuals, you’re right: they’re amplifying one version of the liberal body politic, the public refusing to become a population. It’s also a sentimental public: a world of individuals who feel forced into the political by a structural problem in the world that seems to interfere with their flourishing, but who long for some version of private absorption to be regained after the structural adjustments are made. What it reveals, I think, is that we’d have to think about the different kinds of shame and rage attached to different kinds of mediation of sociality. What form of mediation of collective subjectivity are deemed unbearable, and what kind of threat do they present? Remember that during WWII the austerity public in democratic Europe and the US was associated with competence and pride, not shame. The shame would be in getting caught not caring, which was deemed not just individualism but a diminution of the chances for survival in the social: but even then, everyone knew that at the same time under regimes of crisis where people are asked to become rational for the collective good, informal/grey economies flourish whose existence is not evidence that the austere public is a sham but that people will always make spaces for their appetites to flourish in their unformed and chaotic ways. When I think of political emotions I always presume that even the norm is incoherent.

What’s unbearable might therefore appear as many kinds of negativity, not just shame (the thing you’re focused on). The state might say it’s austerity or you don’t matter, you are not deserving of the social. Or it might say, it’s austerity: think of your grandchildren’s future; or think of the pensioners who are about to go down with no safety net. The absence of compliance would not necessarily involve shame, but resolute narcissism coded as autonomy and pride, or pathos and weakness, or some combination of rationales that would appear as affective noise. It would be interesting to think of austerity in relation to claims that the vulnerable should recode loss as sacrifice and therefore produce an affective cushion to replace the loss of other material ones, which were both real and affective, a sense of trust that all lives fallen from productivity would not land hard on the concrete. The affect not to be borne might be experienced in transmissions of disgust, shame, a tragic sense of not mattering, or an ironic, manic-comic sense of not mattering. It might be unbearable to discover how little one matters to the reproduction of life, but shame is just one of the many moods of affective relation that locates persons and groups in the anxiety of forging an idiom of response.



So then, you ask, how can we reroute shame for making a better social world. Is turning a “shame on you” back on the state effective for organizing not only social justice but an image of a better state, better labor relations, better sociality amongst strangers whose class and collective interest is really not the same, really not ambitious to produce the same better good life? Partly I’m a pragmatist: whatever works to interfere with the reproduction of mass injustice, in this case, the projection of the burden for revamping the cushion and the net onto the people who need the cushion and the net, while the wealthy hoard more of that for themselves. But I still think the battle to be thought through and won is at the level of the imaginary: to confront how powerfully exceptional the neoliberal and democratic economic bubbles of the last 60 years are, how expensive individualism is, how the idea of a mortgaged future needs to be confronted in its stark realities, how entirely different models of collective dependence need to be forged in relation to the reproduction of life because there is no money and the poverty is both material and imaginary.

I don’t think it’s about converting shame, therefore, into pride or anything. I think it requires a hard confrontation with and a very difficult process of changing what the reproduction of life means in both pragmatic and phantasmatic terms. What this means will vary, but its impact on the political and on the social relations of labour will be astonishing, because it has to happen: there will be politics, and there will be sacrifice, and there will be a chaos of wants responded to badly and with a bigger burden on the already vulnerable unless they converge to rethink their own investments in inequality and xenophobia, the ready-to-hand fear formations.

In *Slow Death*⁶ I argue that the long process of delegating worse life and earlier death to the poor and hyper-exploited is now becoming general through the population, such that mental health and physical health are at war (as seen in the amount of alcoholism and obesity rampant wherever a commodity culture reigns as the collective scene for forging pleasure in a now beyond which there is no future) and that mental health is winning (if what we mean is affective, appetitive relief from exhausted sovereignty). Can people bear to fight themselves for better versions of the good life for everyone? Or are we now spiralling down the rabbit hole of liberal culture, where people will only dig in and fight for the right to their individual pleasure?

GH: You talk about the ways how this struggle needs to be conducted on the level of the imaginary. I am familiar with Cornelius Castoriadis’s work on the ‘imaginary institution of society’⁷ but I wondered if you could say a bit more about this imaginary? Clearly, this is in contrast to the ideological battles that are conducted, won and lost around, e.g., the free market, family values,

etc. What kind of practices and strategies are possible or necessary to draw upon this imaginary? How does this engage also with affective politics? You mention that converting shame into pride is clearly not a way forward. Yet: how can emotions such as shame be acknowledged, made explicit and dealt with (I am tempted to say: overcome, but that is too developmental)?

LB: You need to say more to me about why shame, for you, is the fundamental emotion of human self-consciousness whose presence is a blockage to action or flourishing. I’ve argued that we need to distinguish the structure of shame from its normative experience. Structure covers much: the sense of what Ariella Azoulay calls the subject population’s ‘abandonment’ by the world,⁸ their exclusion from the comforts and protections even of a phantasmatic sovereignty; what Eve Sedgwick, in her Kleinian phase, calls ‘the broken circuit’ of reciprocity that induces a reversion of the subject’s attentions onto herself as weight, a heaviness unworthy of being shared or acknowledged); or what Sedgwick calls, in another idiom, the mimetic relation that transpires between a society that negates a population (shaming as political disenfranchisement, moral aversion, and active denigration) and the feeling of that population that it has been shamed and is shameful (thus producing the ‘gay shame’ movement’s mobilization of exuberant negativity).⁹ These are all different explanations for the communication of shame as well as different claims about the relation of social negativity to subjectifying effects.

I am trying to be productively pedantic here. If one of the conditions of contemporary precarity is its spreading throughout class and population loci such that *everyone* has to experience the unreliability of the world’s commitment to continuing 20th century forms of reciprocity – this is a central argument of *Cruel Optimism* – it does not follow that people feel in the same way their abandonment or the archaism of their attachment to certain styles of identification, fantasy, and pleasure to be shamed.¹⁰ Even in the face of shaming negation they could feel nothing, numb, disbelief, rage, exhaustion, resentment, hatred, dissolving anxiety, shame – or even feel free to be cut loose from the old repetitions. So the desire you have to name the negation of shaming as the core structure and experience of contemporary retrenchments does not feel to me to cover the range of the relations between experience and structure that we would need to understand in order to theorize adequately the conversion of a stunned public into a demanding one, for example.

The good life as an already sacrificial model

LB: So perhaps there is not a monoaffective imaginary. But what is collective is what *Cruel Optimism* calls the spectacle of the drama of forced adjustment. In that archive, what ‘shame’ is is to be seen seeing one’s own forced adjustment, to be seen seeing the wearing away of the old anchors for being tethered to the world, to be watched or encountered as one displays profoundly not knowing what to do, to be seen frantically treading water or to be encountered in paralysis (again, there is a whole range of proprioceptive performances through which we learn to register feeling the contingencies of survival and the negativity of encountering ourselves as subjects who make sense either in our fantasies or the world). The shame of being seen in one’s incompetence to life produces many compensations. The worst of them is in the conversion of shame into all the raging xenophobias we see in a variety of monocultural movements (from state-based ones as in Israel, to community-based ones as all over Europe and the US). But even in the places where the response to capitalist restructuring involves mobilizations into mass body politic autopoiesis, the insistence

that the state remain what it was, as though it is what it was, which it isn't, manifests a desire to underdetermine the social imaginary.

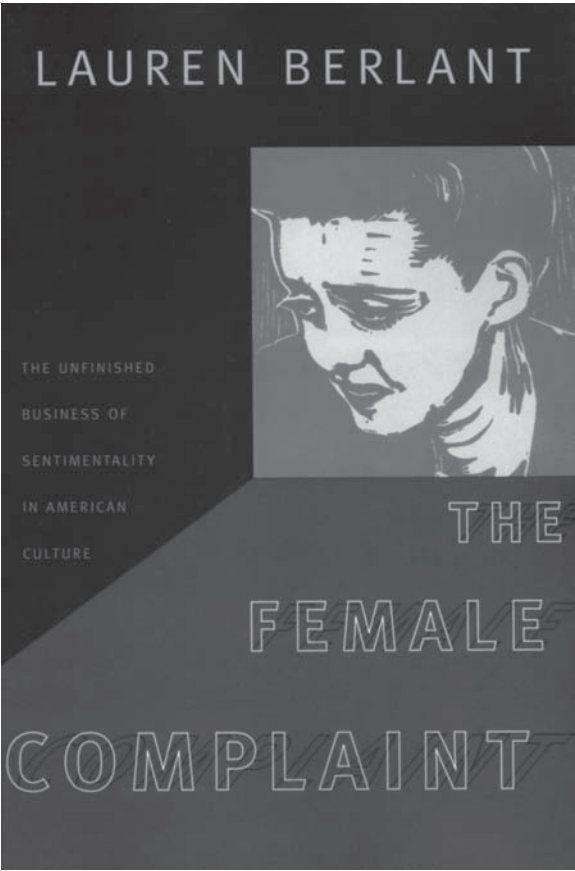
What if people were to take the opportunity to reimagine state/society relations such that the flourishing of reciprocity were differently constructed and assessed, and in which consumer forms of collectivity were not the main way people secure or fantasize securing everyday happiness? This, I would argue, would involve a considerable restructuring of the place of work and expenditure in the production of ordinary life; but might also involve a transformation of what people imagine when they project out what the good life is, when they make images of what will secure satisfaction, and whether "adding up to something" is the best metaphor for justifying having laboured. "Adding up" is just one way to think about what it means to have and to have had a life: it means a radical rethinking of the relation of labor and time, of sacrifice, security, and satisfaction. This involves a huge commitment to rethinking being in relation, and for showing up for the social and sociability. Is it a world, a gathering, a public, a normative fantasy: where are the zones for belonging to be fought out?

The spectre I am proposing of shifting the objects that anchor fantasy and the ambivalent, aleatory affective circuits of sociality is not at all a command to accommodate the current insistence on socializing precarity and privatizing wealth. Far from it. It means gently to point to how the good life model introduced after the war was already a sacrificial model, with softer shadows of longing and shame hovering around aspirations to normative positions of enjoyment, and just with softer landings than what we now confront. I am suggesting that we must begin again to reorganize all of the kinds of value now challenged by the new normal that has not yet become the new ordinary.

GH: Many thanks for being 'productively pedantic' on these points. I feel this section is very instructive and constructive as to the limitations of (a) promoting shame as part of a political strategy from above and (b) similarly in explicating all that 'lies beyond shame', with which I mean your discussion of the limitations of a political/social imaginary if it was to engage in a discussion of a different public. With our impression of how shame as a key emotion has risen to the surface of UK government vis-à-vis its subjects to induce (beyond the shaming) a desire to take responsibility and be prepared for sacrifice, shame has been the key topic for us approaching you to explore further how affect is productive of politics, but also how affect works to precisely avoid the political and the possibilities for a democratic public (as in your concept of the intimate public in the way it operates for US women's culture)¹¹.

In this latest response you talk more explicitly of the investments that people have for maintaining all that exists. You talk of the many compensations that make up for being publicly shamed. It touches on one of my early considerations around how affective politics actively works to not become democratic: The narratives we tell ourselves and others about a past that never quite was. I am thinking particularly here about the narratives of working-class communities that were based on solidarity, consciousness, and an understanding of practice for change. It is also one that too easily is forgetful of its own investments in particular racisms and sexism as well as the many internal divisions of the working classes along craft, industry, religion, and not at least 'respectability'. I fear that much of the political left (when it takes public visibility, in the UK at least) is enthralled by a nostalgia for that past (still) and again is only too forgetful of its own struggles, limitations, and the danger of premising a future on a wrongly imagined past. I am curious as to your thoughts on this.

LB: I love that you asked about this, about the spectre that haunts nostalgia, inducing a



retroprojection of histories that act as screen memories of a time past that was distinguished by its own intractable contradictions, which are now made inaccessible by the affective toupée. You know, we might disagree about this problem a bit. First, to me, and I take solidarity in this from Rancière's *Hatred of Democracy*¹², bad taste, incoherence, wild projection, nostalgias – these are the affective expressions of democracy, these are the neuralgias, the nervous disorders that keep democracy alive for the parties who are included in order to be managed in liberal capitalist regimes. This is what it means to preserve a drive in inadequate objects. But all objects are placeholders, stand-ins, fantasy magnets. Nostalgia is no more like that than fantasies of a revolutionary multitude. Second, and I take this from C. Nadia Seremataki's work on nostalgia, there are many kinds, the kinds that are fetishes in the bad sense, genuine blockages, and kinds that are weapons, fierce refusals of the expropriations of the present.¹³ Who is to say in the abstract? Who is to say what a stuckness is and what an arsenal is and when they are the same? Is stubbornness always a bad thing? I am not here to say that. What I'm interested in is the relation of the noise of the political to the potential to move a question somewhere towards developing new relational modes, not only among people but among people in terms of the infrastructures of sociality that they create, from the state to loose collectivities, scenes of the intimate public all. Third, I have little patience for contemptuous judgments about political style, whether of allies or antagonists. It's like mourning at a funeral: you can't judge people's styles of living with loss in the middle of a situation where loss might be all there is even though one is living on and not dead. So the problem of demanding better conditions of living on has no solution at the level of style. My view about your complaint is that we have to throw everything at the hegemony who are the real problem. The old left is not the real problem, it's the hegemony to whom we consent. Who really blocks our imagination of the social? Can we bear to withdraw our consent to the forms that have pacified us through promising



representation? Can we bear to withdraw our consent from these forms without withdrawing our consent to the possibility (not the probability, sigh) of the capaciously social? The left is not the problem, nor is the fantasy of an older working class solidarity (I hear this story most in the UK from people who lived through the early 20th century Depression). The problem is that in their desperation people try to ride the wave of the forms they know, even when there is no water beneath them nor air to float them. The problem is that people do not feel that the world is a generous and patient space for them to be awkward in. In the meantime they remember the good times. I am grateful that in so many political domains there have been and are good times, though, where solidarity is lived and not just projected. It matters for maintaining social justice aspiration even when the episodes of animated convergence are minor, of short duration. But, beyond comfort: we need to make compelling forms for the social (for sociality, for intimate publics, including the political ones), forms that make taking the leap into the beyond of comfort worth it. It's hard to ask people to become more uncomfortable at a moment when comfort itself seems like a nostalgic fantasy in the bad sense, but that's where things are: at the end of one kind of fantasy we need to be lured toward better ones, new misrecognitions of the relation of the materialized real to a projection but now a projection that reorients us to a different, better mode of the reproduction of life, a different *sensus communis*, a different structure of feeling associated with the good life. There are no unmixed political feelings, there is no unambivalent potentiality for the social. We know that when we come to the social component of the political from affect rather than from the ascriptive. There is just the possibility of teasing ourselves toward a reorientation in which we can sense a better accommodation of desire and pleasure, of risk and sweetness, of aversion and attachment, of incoherence and patience.

‘How does it feel to be a bad investment?’

MV: I'd like to come back to something you mentioned at the very beginning: "In capitalist logics of asesis, the workers' obligation is to be more rational than the system, and their recompense is to be held in a sense of pride at surviving the scene of their own attrition." Also, to a point you make towards the end of your introduction to *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*: "What if it turns out that compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but are two sides of a bargain that the subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality?"¹⁴ The connection between these two propositions for me is that structural inequality as it is produced by capitalist logics effectively disappears by slipping back into a (historically specific) human nature, that of the rational individual, who may on occasion feel some sympathy for the less rational, because after all, contingent sympathy is also part of human nature. But the implication is that when the co-extensivity of capitalism with human nature (as well as with systems of governing human collectives such as democracy) becomes as established as it has – without any serious contestation for some time already – even in times of deadlock and disorientation, the irrationality of the system is so individualized that the perception is that it can be dealt with on the basis of individual rationality; this is augmented by the actual structural equation between people's life prospects and the health of financial systems, like pension funds and so forth. The imperative to 'rationalize' personal spending is then embraced on the scale of the state, thus being converted back into systemic irrationality. So I guess what I'm trying to ask is how that rationality might be disrupted. Would the rupture come from people recognizing not just that the system has failed them and they have

Photo left: Stephanie Brooks.

no one to look to but themselves now, but that there is a difference between themselves and the ‘system’? Thus to fight not just ‘the system’ but themselves as reproducers of it, as you say, and I guess that is also a very old question in trying to imagine practical alternatives to capitalism, or how it is practically to be overcome. It is absolutely the question of the imaginary, but an imaginary that has to admit a collective dimension to change in any way. Your observation about the Tea Party as longing to return to a ‘private version of absorption’ that they’re entitled to can perhaps be reflected in the UK context as a feeling of being beleaguered by interests which are scheming to do away with the residual state mechanisms that allow people to pursue that private version of absorption, by and large. So there is generally not a clash of logics, more a vying for the speaking place of a rationality that cannot be breached, that is, an economistic one: saving the welfare state in terms of an economistic logic or doing away with it according to an economistic logic.

At the moment, the fight is indeed being led, in the cases where it is happening at all, by defending what remains of former collective settlements, of an already largely – eviscerated welfare state in the UK. But even this – for example, the recent education protests – is creating optimism on the waste ground, and perhaps generating other kinds of projects on a wider level for the first time in this period – rather than just attempts to hold on to the bearable parts of the current situation.

LB: I love the line Mark Fisher¹⁵ pulls from Jameson, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism”: we have become affectively so saturated by attachment to the atrophied field of enjoyment that we are stymied trying to imagine another way of relating to others and to our own optimism. Developing symbolic practical infrastructures for alternativity is the task of progressive praxis, but it’s a daunting task. The collective settlement was that as long as the economy was expanding everyone would have a shot at creatively inventing their version of the good life, and not just assuming the position allotted to them by embedded class, racial, and gendered histories of devalued and unrecognized economic and social labor. The half century since the collective settlement was established embeds many generations in a binding fantasy.

It wasn’t cruel optimism to think that there would be give in the system, spreading opportunities for living beyond instrumental productivity, and yet we know that even in the good times so many people didn’t have enough hours in the day to look each other in the eye and relax. What expanded was fantasy, not time and not a cushion of real-time money. The expansion of the credit economy in Europe and the U.S. once the industrial growth had moved on took care of that, though, purchasing when it couldn’t purchase ordinary time, and now that’s being revoked too. Plus the revocation of educational democracy, a stand for a public investment in everyone who wanted a shot, is an admission that everyone didn’t have a shot, and maybe shouldn’t have wanted it. “How does it feel to be a bad investment?” has substituted itself for “How does it feel to be a problem?” It makes me speechless, for a minute, to face those blinking phrases, and to consider the whole history that has transpired between them.

So if an intimate public were to form around this crisis of what the baseline of survival is, and what realism ought to look like for the present



and in the near future, people would converge to talk not just about taking back the state but taking back relationality as such so that the state would seem not the origin of the social but one of its instruments. That would be a good. If people were to converge around an understanding that a bubble is not a habitable world and that a liveable world requires admitting the need to reinvent work (I am completely an autonomist on this question) that would protect both the people working and the nature and relationality from which they extract value then they would have to look at all the kinds of work there are and figure out a fair way to distribute it not just to match individual capacities but for the good of the world as such.

Can we bear to reinvent “new relational modes” across the incommensurate scenes of work-nature-intimate stranger, and not just among lovers? Can we bear to see the good of education neither as citizen-building toward monoculture (even “in difference”) nor as engineering vocational allegories of self-worth, but a space for the kinds of creativity and improvised interest that cultivate in people a curiosity about living (how it’s been and how it might be) that’s genuine and genuinely experimental and not, as you say, aspiring to an unbreachable rational space? If we are educated in experimentality and curiosity, alterity’s comic mode of recognition-in-bafflement, then we diminish our fear of the stranger and of the stranger in ourselves, the place where we don’t make any more sense than the world does, in all of our tenderness and aggression. We would refuse to do the speculative work of policing and foreclosing each other that lets the state and capital off the hook for exhausting workers and pressuring communities to clean up their act, not be inconvenient, and to be sorry they tried to live well. To make possible the time and space for flourishing affective infrastructures, of grace and graciousness, such as those I’ve described could make happiness and social optimism possible not as prophylactic fantasy or credit psychosis but in ordinary existence. All of the hustling that goes on amongst the working and non-working poor and the generally stressed has to do with the desire to coast a little instead of work and police ourselves to death. But right now there’s not a lot of easy coasting going around outside of the zones of disinhibition that provide episodes of relief from the daily exhaustion, and people seem to think that if they’re policed, if they’re always auditioning for citizenship and social membership, so too should others be forced to live near the edge of the cliff and earn standing, the right to stand. Welfare used to be called ‘relief’. ‘Relief’ must have said much more than it was bearable to say about the capitalist stress position.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/09/george-osborne-cut-4bn-benefits-welfare>
- 2 David Graeber, ‘Debt: The first five thousand years’, *Mute* 12, 2009, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-08-20-graeber-en.html>
- 3 Sina Najafi, David Serlin and Lauren Berlant, ‘The broken circuit: an interview with Lauren Berlant’, *Cabinet*, Issue 31, Fall 2008, http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/najafi_serlin.php
- 4 Mario Tronti, *The strategy of refusal*, <http://libcom.org/library/strategy-refusal-mario-tronti>
- 5 Polly Toynbee, ‘Spending review: What’s all the fuss about? Just you wait’, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/20/spending-review-fuss-polly-toynbee>
- 6 Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 33, Number 4, Summer 2007. http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/33n4/33n4_berlant2.html
- 7 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary institution of society*. (trans.: Kathleen Blamey) Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
- 8 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Boston: Zone Books, 2008.
- 9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002, 35-66.
- 10 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, forthcoming.
- 11 In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant writes: “The concept of the ‘intimate public’ thus carries the fortitude of common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies. A public is intimate when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans... The ‘women’s culture’ concept grows from such a sense of lateral identification: it sees collective sociality routed in revelations of what is personal, regardless of how what is personal has itself been threaded through mediating institutions and social hierarchy. It marks out the nonpolitical situation of most ordinary life as it is lived as a space of continuity and optimism and social self-cultivation. If it were political, it would be democratic. Ironically, in the United States the denigration of the political sphere that has always marked mass politics increasingly utilizes these proximate or ‘juxtapolitical’ sites as resources for providing and maintaining the experience of collectivity that also, sometimes constitute the body politic; intimate publics can provide alibis for politicians who claim to be members of every community *except* the political one. There are lots of ways of inhabiting these intimate publics: a tiny point of identification can open up a field of fantasy and de-isolation, of vague continuity, or of ambivalence. All of these energies of attachment can indeed become mobilized as counterpublicity but usually aren’t. Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens the sense in consensus: this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility.” Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint. The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p. 10f.
- 12 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran. London: Verso, 2007.
- 13 C. Nadia Serematakis, *The Senses Still*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 17.
- 14 Lauren Berlant, ‘Introduction’, in Lauren Berlant (ed.) *Compassion. The culture and politics of an emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp 1-13, p. 10.
- 15 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero Books, 2009, p. 1.

About the Elephant in the Room

Peter Conlin interviews Stefan Szczelkun

This is an edited interview with Stefan Szczelkun; artist, organiser and one-time member of the legendary Scratch Orchestra, who set up ‘Working Press: books by and about working class artists’¹ in the 1980s, and more recently organised the ‘Agit Disco’² project with Martin Dixon, in which people are invited to write a playlist of their favourite political music. He currently teaches part-time at the University of Westminster and is a parent. Peter Conlin, originally from Canada, is an artist, writer and organiser, now active with rampART³ social centre collective and researching self-organisation in neoliberal times.

The interview, conducted prior to the implementation of the ‘austerity’ cuts, presents views from different generational and national contexts, and attempts to use these differences as a way to articulate thoughts on working class identification and dis-identification, oppression and solidarity. The questions are vast and some of the issues potentially divisive. The intention of this interview is to contribute a larger discussion about the current lived experience of class beyond being an object of academic research and outside the terms of the mainstream media.

Peter Conlin: I think a lot of people when they hear the term ‘class oppression’ would think it an anachronism or something better applied to India or China. While there is an increased interest in class in some academic circles, and the recent financial crisis has reinvigorated Marxist critiques of capitalism, this doesn’t seem to be evident in the lived experience of working class people, or is it? But I assume that you think class oppression is alive and well. And so I’m interested in something that you and I feel is very active, formational, and yet considered not to exist. Of course in the UK there is a never ending obsession with class, and yet so many day-to-day experiences are nevertheless assumed to be class neutral which results in a kind of elephant-in-the-room situation.

Stefan Szczelkun: Yes it is extraordinary. But that’s the whole thing – when people can’t even talk about something, it shows the power of the oppression. If you can’t talk about something then there are unconscious forces at work to silence discussion. And I think that within middle class circles [discussion of class oppression] is considered vulgar, because it starts to bring up emotions that people don’t want to feel. And mentioning it is seen as divisive. I was vocal in a recent collective meeting where we were discussing how we felt about an upper class patron... and it’s difficult to talk about it. I said to one person, “I went to your wedding and I saw the house your parents live in and I found it quite intimidating”. There was a pause and I felt awkward. It is difficult to say things like that. And then there’s the history of those sort of jokes of saying, ‘I’m more working class than you’ – one person says that they lived in a house without carpets and then pretty soon someone is claiming to have been brought up in a shoe box, that you went to grammar school and I didn’t. I have another friend who is always going on about people who go to university – that all these people that go off to university and say they are working class that they don’t know what they’re talking about, and they all use these long words that nobody can understand theorising about it. So all these things are kind of uncomfortable, and you don’t really want to go there maybe, in a normal chummy chat with people.

PC: Seems like we’re left with an indirect approach as the only way to talk about ‘it’. But then there are blanks, things that can’t be said, and the very fact that we can’t talk about it shows its power.

SS: The discussion starts to go into areas that you can’t talk about within the university setting. The discussion of painful stuff might require something like thumping on the table, or ranting, or bursting into tears. And this level of emotions is not part of a normal ‘rational’, as in academic,

discourse.

PC: I understand that your approach to class has often been on a psychological level, trying to understand class in that way. And so I’m wondering, with your experience of approaching class on this personal or affective way, how can we broach class without it becoming merely personal, or without it being seen as resentment, an accusation, triggering guilt? Like a petty personal thing as opposed to a social- and political- personal?

SS: Maybe that is the key problem. I have for years taken part in revaluation co-counselling, which was very interested in understanding oppression. The practice which was, simply on a very basic level, exchanging time with peers: You talk about what you want to talk about for 20 minutes and then they talk about what they want to talk about for the same amount of time. There was interest from working class people to do that and share common experience. So the protection of having this really clear amount of time, and, also, with the general agreement that what was said was confidential and you could say whatever you wanted to and be as emotional as you felt, produced a space to speak beyond the normal boundaries of polite conversation. So there was more chance to explore the affective sides of the class experience. So that was a very important experience in understanding my own ambivalent feelings, but also in being able to witness other people going outside the limits of the conventional discourses.

Also, that segues into culture and what culture has to do with class. ...I think that fluid expression in all forms relates better to working class *oralacy* than everything having to go through the funnel of not only words, but written down words, and written down words that relate to a background of a particular literary tradition. I’ve always thought that was a place where something could happen, where we could get a bit more elbow room, be a bit more expressive...

PC: You have used this term ‘the Definition’ (from the 1990 essay ‘Myths of Class Identity’), and it refers to how working class people are taught to feel inferior. It is a shorthand for a set of scripts and situations that have been internalized, and produce a sense of illegitimacy, and, in doing so, subjugates. So I’m wondering how ‘the Definition’ works today?

SS: To me it’s logically necessary that it must be the case (that we have been conditioned to feel inferior), although I’m not saying I can describe exactly how this happens or have seen it described. If you could describe the mechanisms of oppression they would fall apart because they would become absurd. And people would say, ‘We can change that’. But as long as they are kept outside our ability to express and define them, we cannot change oppression. But logically it must be the case that something pretty drastic happened to us. All of us human beings with all these fantastic abilities to think and do, but we carry within us this sense of illegitimacy, we can’t do anything to take charge of our own lives. In upper class people you can see the sense of entitlement. Now I would think that every single human being was born with the same potential to take charge of their lives. So if you cannot see that character in most people, where does it go? So something must happen in the lives of young working class people. I don’t think we are conceived as oppressed people – something must have happened in our lifetime. So what is it exactly that happens? It is extraordinary that the mechanisms can be so unknown. The job, as I see it, is to assume that these things did happen and find ways of getting knowledge of them. This is seeing oppression as an affective, psychological, but also mechanical thing that can start to be dismantled once it is known.

PC: So you could say that one side of class culture is to unearth these and to expose what these

scripts are, but I’m wondering what are our current examples?

SS: Current examples of what we can’t describe!

PC: But I think they can be described, they are not forever ineffable. You can find really clear examples, lots of songs, a film like *Frozen River* or books like Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*. That seems to be a classic example of someone exposing these patterns, but they seem few and far between now?

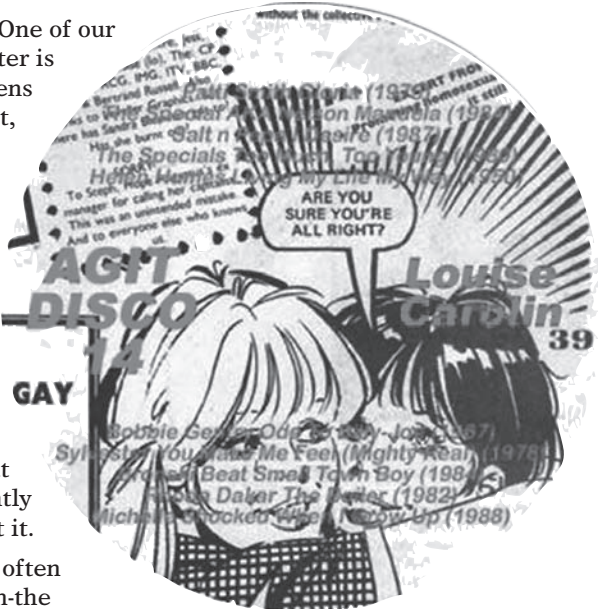
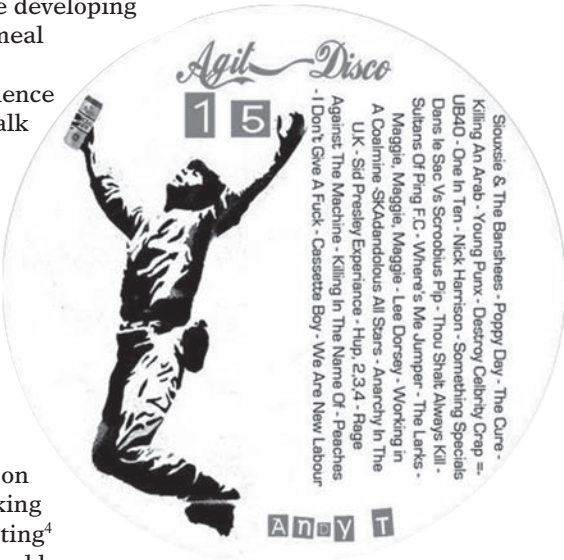
SS: I think there are examples of artists who have made breakthroughs about this, but the reason we don’t get a picture developing from these piecemeal breakthroughs is because of this silence we are trying to talk about. There is, perhaps, some extraordinary level of embarrassment about bringing together all the people who have made these insights. As *Working Press* we published a book on 20th century working class women’s writing⁴ after some work had been done on male British authors by Howard Slater⁵. But people did not seem to really get excited about looking at things in this way – there wasn’t any shared vision of how this could lead to a dismantling of oppression, or something!

...Let’s put all of that stuff together and see what we can learn from it. See what they have already discovered. No, it’s all kept isolated as fragments. My idea with *Agit Disco* was to put the musics that talked politically together and see what that was. As Stewart Home⁶ said, “There are shed loads of agitdisco tracks out there”, it is just that they are enormously diluted in the media.

PC: So in terms of this whole internalized inferiority routine I wonder about the ‘chav’ phenomena as an example of how working class people are seen as worthless. It’s part of the class vocabulary of today isn’t it, the classic split between the worthy and the unworthy working class?

SS: I guess so. One of our friend’s daughter is in her early teens and very bright, but she talks about people in her school as ‘chavs’ – people who do not have intellectual upwardly mobile ideas; ‘chavs’ take on popular culture without being sufficiently selective about it.

PC: Class is so often the elephant-in-the room – it’s shaping everything but no one’s saying anything. For myself, some situations in ‘radical culture’ scenes in London, it is sort of a working class environment, and sort of not. There are perma-culture people, radical environmentalists, most of them squatters in their 20s and 30s who cannot really relate to the existing class terms. They can see it as important, but cannot see their own reality in all that.



There are also some ties with ‘Class War’⁷, who want ‘real working class’ and anything outside of that doesn’t fit. Often when class comes up in conversation people think immediately of the ‘Class War’ style, and it ends there. And then there are middle class people who are all very ‘anti-capitalist’ and everything, but reject any reference to working class issues as something outmoded and in fact part of the problem. And then there is the situation in primarily middle class settings (in universities and also well-heeled art and activist collectives), where to broach the topic of class will get you, directly or in a euphemised way, responses like: ‘Yes, I have had middle class entitlement, and that isn’t fair, but it has resulted in a certain confidence and abilities and I shouldn’t have to apologise for that, as a group we require those things’, or ‘Class domination of course exists, but not among us, we’re too aware and nice’, or just triggering guilt and awkwardness.

People realise the truth in whatever statement but feel all this is too deeply rooted, much of it is beyond our control and was set in motion before we left the womb, so while it is true, ‘What can we do?’ Once I had a guy tell me that I didn’t really come from a working class background because my mother was a nurse, and so the training required to become a nurse severed proletarian ties! And of course having a university degree automatically makes people middle class.

SS: Everyone of us needs to talk about those situations. Everyone has their versions and they need to be talked about! And I guess people, like the guy you mentioned, also need to do a lot of venting their frustration, but be told in no uncertain terms what crap they are talking when they wrongly project that frustration on to others.

PC: In a different way, part of the elephant-in-the-room situation comes from really narrow ideas of what class is. There is the approach that we shouldn’t focus on class belonging but rather on class becoming. It comes from J.K. Gibson-Graham who attempts to do a very direct post-structural theorisation of class, which ends up in the unfortunate direction of social businesses, but I think this point is a really good one. If class is seen as a frozen entity, and solidarity is built upon matching a fixed set of characteristics, then the whole thing is doomed to a bad end. However, if class is something that is actively made, and continually remade, then solidarity lies more in people coming together in struggles and situations which aren’t entirely known. It sounds promising, but what could it really mean?

SS: Yes, I think that’s an exciting idea. I don’t think solidarity necessarily means belonging to a similar class. I think solidarity and culture are really closely linked and that’s one of the reasons I’m interested in culture. When we make culture, that’s about making agreements, we are collectively able to come to agreements on things, look at how we generate language, and any culture is a complex set of agreements. And that is a basic mechanism of solidarity, surely. Solidarity is based on some kind of mutually held set of meanings, goals, recognitions or something like that.

PC: But it seems that, traditionally, working class power came from similar kinds of people sharing similar kinds of situations. Or at least that is what we are led to believe. Now the working class is much more diverse –different ethnicities, different genders, different kinds of work from so-called low level white collar looking work, to an endless array of service work, to ‘classic’ manufacturing jobs, and let’s not forget about all the situations that are hidden by the term ‘unemployment.’ It’s the big question: How does solidarity come out of that?

SS: Maybe those 19th century proletarians had it easy! They’re all in one great big shed all doing the same thing, with the same blue overalls on, knocking off at the same time, with the same hooter. Why wouldn’t solidarity come easy in that situation. But how do you achieve solidarity within our possibly more diverse and fragmented situation? ...It is interesting to see the current limits of this idea in the *Agit Disco* project. People

have very different genres of music they relate to. I would say, ‘Oh, here is a new Agit Disco by so and so’, and Stuart might say, ‘Oh, very interesting but that is not my kind of music’, or ‘Don’t bother sending the CD to him because he won’t listen to it’. So it shows me how most people are in different worlds of taste and genre that they identify with. But, how about you just listen to these things because it is not about trying to convert you to folk music if you are into the blues. What is needed is an appreciation of the widest spectrum of approaches to thinking about politics with music.

PC: You have been involved in a lot of collective organisations through the years. How do you understand class in those contexts? As you well know, to say something is a collective organisation is a little bit optimistic because in actual fact all of these existing hierarchies are right there and quite active, so it is more of a goal.

SS: Well yes, they vary a lot, because some things I have been in like the Scratch Orchestra⁸, by its name it suggests a collective – it was 50 or so people improvising. In actual practice playing a piece of music it would actually be extremely collective, but it also had an aristocratic and charismatic leader in Cornelius Cardew. And it had other kinds of senior people who were part of the early formation of it, and surprisingly they contradicted the normal hierarchy by saying the youngest should arrange concerts first. So it turned the whole structure around, so those things were there but the actual conscious nature it took turned the whole usual order on its head. Something like Brixton Gallery⁹ was, I would guess, 95% working class, and everyone used to meet in this huge open meeting once a month, and thrash out the next two or three months’ shows. Obviously people who could speak more forcibly, who had good rhetorical skills, could get their ideas supported more than those that were quieter, or silent, or drunk! But we were aware of that and worked against it. It was the most open, democratic situation you could imagine. People did take administrative jobs and things like that, but they didn’t really impose themselves on, well, they didn’t draw power away or bring undue attention to themselves. Well they did slightly, but essentially the thing was this very open, democratic entity for about three years, and very interesting results came out of that. So collectives vary a lot really.

PC: A couple of different things come to mind when you say that. I find cross-class alliances are not so easily made in collective groups; they can in some ways almost be a blood bath in terms of recreating class hierarchies because of a lack of structure. But in other ways I was never a big ‘group person’ until 7 or 8 years ago, coming out of a highly individualistic society, and from an arts education that for all its sophistication is still based on the solitary artist. I felt I sort of came to the end of the road with that. And then I discovered all of these really frustrating organisations! Which I think are invaluable, right, but for me this is a different way into a kind of class politics – essentially learning to work together, countering individualism, but it doesn’t come easy, in some ways it comes horribly! We have to figure out how to do it, and often this is almost starting from scratch.

SS: Absolutely, even more, the fact that we don’t have easy ways of working on our class differences, and countering those senses of entitlement in people that tend to dominate, makes those situations very difficult. I think I would run away from a collective where I saw that going on!

PC: There are lots of good people in the groups I am talking about, but the question is how to introduce class issues into these situations?

SS: Far from it that I suggest what you do. What I would like to see is working class artists, environmentalists, or scientists, coming together and thinking about their own particular area, and how they are affected by the class situation. I tried to do this with Working Press. By inviting any working class artist I met to publish a book, on

their own expense but under a collective imprint that supported it, people would, I thought, express what working class artists think and do. I’d often thought that if 6 or 10 artists got together and said to the Arts Council [England] or powers that be, ‘Look, we want this!’, we would get it. They would have to fund us or respond, because 6 or 10 people saying the same thing is very powerful. Only 6 or 10, I’m not talking about tens of thousands... a few people can be very potent if they can speak fearlessly.

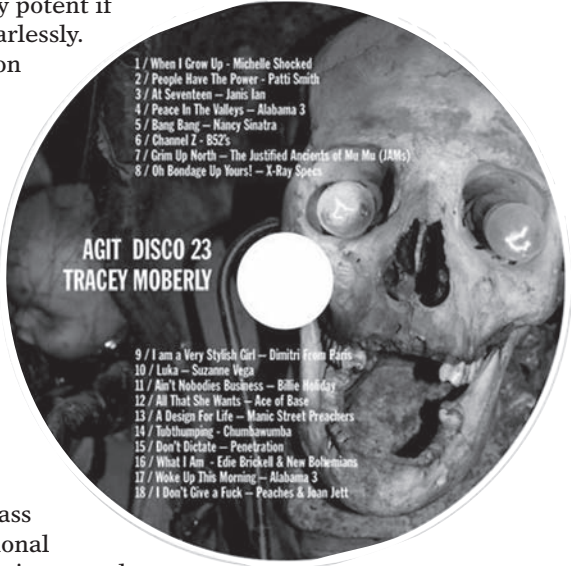
But for some reason no one wanted to do that – to really assert ourselves as working class artists. Like some artists didn’t want to be seen as black artists, they didn’t want to be labelled, they just wanted to be an artist...

PC: The focus of this interview has been largely on class and affect – emotional domination and resistance, class antagonism from within. I guess this is part of the longer project that has been going on since the late 1960s of getting away from reducing class to economics, seeing culture as a superstructure, etc. But maybe we have gone too far in this direction? We can talk about attitudes, behaviours, mental scripts, humiliation stories, etc, but how much of all this psychological and emotional stuff is tied directly to not having the bucks? Growing up with limited resources means you just cannot entertain certain ideas, you write off entire avenues; and this isn’t due to feeling bad about yourself, negative thinking, what you will, it’s a material limitation. We can say the economic and cultural are all tied together, interdependent, but all too often it is one or the other.

SS: Is it all solely held together by economic lack? I think that the effects of economic lack and the past accumulation of the effects of oppression on our psyche are woven together and hard to untangle. If we suddenly got economic equality we would still have a legacy of deep affect issues. But in sum I think it will be difficult to get over that mountain range to achieve economic equality and the end of class division without first doing some other work to recover our ability to think about these things more clearly. This is talking about the effects and affects of class oppression, and then engaging to counter the ongoing reproduction of those conditions. It’s not an either/or really – better to advance on all fronts.

PC: For myself, coming from a working class background with limited resources, there seemed to be this choice between being ultra-ambitious, which more or less would have meant succeeding through the most conventional channels and conservative roles (being the dominated of the dominated as Bourdieu referred to the ambitious working class climber¹⁰), or accepting more limited horizons. In some ways I am talking about refusing either ‘becoming middle class’ or ‘staying what has been defined as working class’. How do you deal with the ‘career’ question in this respect?

SS: ...AFC Wimbledon is an example of how collective action is struggling with economic necessities that arise because of the success of



the team. Wimbledon was a football team bought by an investor and ‘moved’ from South London to Milton Keynes leaving their fans behind! The fans were a community that existed for generations so when this happened they decided to form their own football club from scratch. The joint resources of about 5,000 hard core fans turned out to cover every productive skill that was required to set up and run a football club. The fans also pooled money from their savings to fund it and so the club, AFC Wimbledon aka The Dons, is now fan owned. The club is doing well and has now climbed up to the Conference League. From now on they may struggle with the rules and regulations that come into play in the higher leagues and their financial implications. Will the club be able to stay fan controlled as well as being successful? Or will they be tempted to take on an investor that will trade capital for control?

In terms of career questions, the best simply theoretical model I’ve come across is Habermas’ use of *system* and *lifeworld* as a binary abstract. When we get into careers to the extent that they become the most important aspect that drives our lives we can no longer respond effectively and honestly to the lifeworld which is the direct unmediated communication of our collective desires and needs; the street, the underground, the crowd, even smaller groups. The need to protect career and what comes to depend on it is part of the mindcage that constrains us. Of course the ingenious ways in which people negotiate this is perhaps one of the main things we should look at...

PC: One thing I didn’t really get across in our talk thus far is what seems to me to be the absolutely dire situation of class politics today, at a time when there is growing inequality with a whole series of indicators of this, such as Danny Dorling’s work¹¹. Who actually identifies as being ‘working class’? Anyone under 40? Sociologist Bev Skeggs said “who would want to be seen as working class? (possibly only academics are left)”. Or Barbara Peters’ observation, something to the effect of: ‘If you can choose to be working class, you’re probably not’. What vital forces are there to identify with? This connects with the importance of the current economic situation: The professions are harder for working class people to enter into than they were in the 1960s.¹² Real incomes of working class people are declining, and there seems to be no vital class movement happening. The only class action the mainstream press identifies is the English Defence League and the British National Party. In many ways it seems to be a real dead end situation, this is why I wanted to do this interview. Do you see it as dire? In most of the things you’ve said I don’t detect a sense crisis or anguish, which is good – it’s always bad to panic! – but the actual situation seems to be pretty bleak. What’s your take on this?

SS: Maybe having lived through the Cold War when imminent nuclear holocaust seemed quite likely, plus the fact I’ve always chosen to live on the edge of poverty to do art, I don’t know...

PC: Mounting student debt and situations where it is harder for working class people to become journalists or doctors is disempowering, irrespective of negative or positive outlooks.

SS: I think we should resist these slides, but in the longer view I prefer to take an attitude based on strategic thinking and theory. As oppression tends to picture us as powerless I think it is useful to look at the reality of our power both in terms of our historic achievements and our current possibilities. Do we emphasise the direness and downward trends or do we look at the ways we are doing well, celebrate achievements, and look at what resources we do have now that we could make use of. It’s a choice of strategies and what is the best use of our time.

PC: Further on this line. One thing I see in you is an identification with the working class – it’s definitely not dogmatic or just some theoretical claim. So many people I know who come from working class backgrounds, and who are now in art and the academy, have honed the

art of ‘passing’ as middle class. For them the idea of identifying as a working class person would be the kiss of death. With the exception of people like Damian Hirst who haul out their working class-ness, on occasion, as a badge of authenticity. My bind is that in many ways I can’t identify as working class because I am not identified as working class by any class. My class position is too indeterminate; but no way am I interested in the sorry spectacle of trying to pass as middle class. So I can only identify with what is called working class in a few ways. Also my current position – my non-middle class financial situation! – is in some way chosen and other ways not. I never know if it is a virtue of necessity kind of thing. But this question undermines class identification, and is part of how ‘the refusal of work’ May ’68-type protest has in many ways turned into the basis of current forms of exploitation. We refuse kinds of work as a kind of class assertion, but if you are able to refuse work then you can’t really be working class. Or so it is said. What are your reflections on this?

SS: I just had an evening with an Italian poet who does temp teaching jobs, in his 40s who is obviously working class to me but who claims himself as middle class because of his ‘good’ Italian education, mortgage and so on (he has a small flat in Thornton Heath one of the cheapest property areas in London), but also because of the failures of Italian communists who have lost so many people to the Northern League. Then towards the end of a long argument he suddenly said that he was pleased I didn’t see him as middle class! I think that the term ‘working class’ can be taken up as a provocation and strategy rather than being too worried about exactly how it is mapped out at any point...

PC: But maybe this problem of identification is that class politics is going under new terms? This could be anything from seeing the rights of migration as a class politics to ‘social justice’ approaches. I think of the thirst for collective forms that we have seen in the past decade, such as recent factory and university occupations, open source production, wiki-forms, and also the collectivism seen in community organisations and self-organised projects – whether this be social centres, co-ops, or supporter-run football clubs. However, a lot of these are lacking in any class language, and generally carefully avoid any overt politics, and not surprisingly, are easily co-opted within capitalism and existing social patterns. Terms like the ‘precariate’ from the Euro Mayday movement, or theoretical concepts like ‘the multitude’ aren’t used by actually existing working class people in the UK.

In terms of activism, who can we identify as active in class issues now: SWP, Class War, organised labour (though unions are expected to usually work for their members’ interests, not for the working class), what else? Does it matter? But maybe the idea is to look for working class culture rather than parties or activist groups. But if we start claiming cultural acts as a putative working class resistance or hidden political agency I am not sure we are left with a social movement. It is too indirect, hedged, all too ‘cultural’?

SS: Maybe there aren’t big flashy organisations but a whole lot of people up and down the country. Maybe we can’t point to groups or activism because of the ubiquitous elephants, but people are there, quietly picking away at their patch.

In term of looking at working class culture rather than parties or activist groups, I think this could be my next project: To create a virtual festival of working class culture – in all imaginable categories – to seed it with a few names, even reclaim significant venues. Perhaps it could be published with the title of ‘A Guide to Working Class Culture: to all those who doubted its existence(s)’. There is a Festival of Working Class Music¹³ in Liverpool each year but that is the closest I know of...

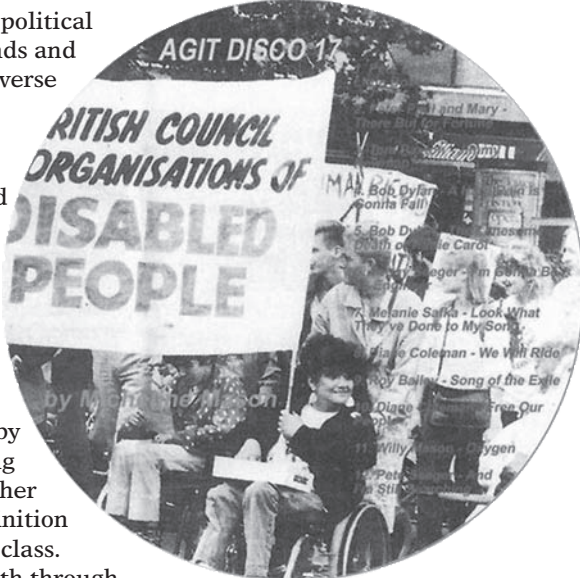
PC: I certainly am not too attracted to the tedious game of definitions but there is no way around it. Coming up with terms, names, metaphors, coinage,

handles, schema, and all that, is how it works. It is part of a symbolic struggle. We can just let it ride, there is a loss in never asking what it means, and it usually means being defined by some other group, on their terms. If you have a festival of working class music, or whatever, you will have to figure out some kind of criteria of who to invite, the focus of the thing (aside from one’s friends!), etc.

SS: Perhaps friendship is key... I wouldn’t worry about who is and who is not... I always thought of working class culture being a welcoming thing. Funny thought as son of a refugee. But it comes from my mum who felt the exclusion of the class above us that she aspired to and yet had an idea of the East End of London as a warm place that would want her (or me?) back, even though she came from Nottingham. Maybe that’s just a comfort blanket fantasy?

To define things you have to collect them together first... So I’d go about this by intuitively collecting expressive stuff that working class people do. How do we know they are working class? Biography; content of their artform; contexts in which their work is made public; the present day financial situation of each artist; a sense of resonance with the informed collector. Agit Disco is an example: asking (mostly) working class people who know their music to say what music effected them in a political way. The results start to give a sense of what musics are having pointedly political effects in the minds and lives of a quite diverse group of working class writers.

With *Working Press* I just invited all the people met who were activist some way take part. They had to be happy with the imprint subtitle – ‘books by and about working class artists’ – rather than fitting a definition of being working class. So it was done both through personal meetings and a kind of intuitive agreement.



Notes

- 1 <http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/phd108.htm>
- 2 <http://www.agitdisco.com/>
- 3 <http://therampart.wordpress.com/>
- 4 Richardson, Sarah with Merylyn Cherry, Sammy Palfrey and Gail Chester. *Writing on the Line, 20th Century Working-Class Women Writers*, Working Press, 1996.
- 5 Slater, Howard. *Working Class Novelists 1930 – 1950*, Working Press Research, 1993.
- 6 <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/>
- 7 <http://classwar-uk.blogspot.com/>
- 8 <http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/phd102.htm>
- 9 <http://brixton50.co.uk/artists/>
- 10 For Bourdieu the climber is in a further dominated position because they are exposed to cultural insecurities and lack the correct habitus for the positions they attempt to secure. This point is not to be confused with the classic Bourdieuan formulation of the intellectual as occupying a dominated position within the dominant class.
- 11 *Injustice: Why social inequality persists*, Bristol: Polity, 2010; *Poverty, wealth and place in Britain, 1968 to 2005*, Bristol: Polity, 2007.
- 12 According to recent research by the Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change at the University of Manchester.
- 13 <http://www.workingclassmusic.org.uk>

The Real Broken Society

Tom Jennings

Beyond flurries of current affairs sound and fury, the regressive scale of the UK coalition government's austerity programme is clear. Massive cuts in state social spending posed as a balance to the banking sector bailout may marginally inconvenience the relatively well-off, but significantly accelerate the attack on the conditions of the working-class begun with Thatcherism and refined under New Labour. Withdrawal of welfare and support infrastructure risk destitution for millions facing punitive sanctions for avoiding starvation wages and quasi-slavery conditions in neoliberal workhouse society. Meanwhile social cleansing in housing and education will leave the respectable poor nowhere to go, their precarious positions propping up the service economy usurped by children of the new middle-classes trading in cultural capital accumulated during Blair's debt-fuelled consumer growth. And as intensifying proletarianisation and downsizing of insecure professions erodes petit-bourgeois security, status distinctions congenial to flexible affective labour represent one remaining bulwark against ruin.

Structural adjustment's pitiless downward pressure on the majority's living standards could conceivably threaten the prevailing commonsense of competitive individualism as preferable and inevitable. Yet the various strata targeted for increasingly intimate disciplining and value extraction remain segmented by market imperatives – 'good citizenship' demanding hysterical self-commodification and the infinite infantile acquisition of material trivia. But this collective psychosis can only masquerade as tolerable lifestyle if its corrosive existential consequences are mystified – accomplished most readily by externalising anxiety about the sustainability of the self and personal relations via the denigration of others. So the recalcitrant underclasses retain residual mass-cultural utility as cautionary tales – their projected vulgarity and irresponsible comportment exemplify an inability to properly adapt to whatever shifts in the privatised status quo promise quick profits for someone this year.

Mainstream moral fascism, forensically dissecting and punishing failure to thrive, is mirrored in Reality TV's gratuitous sadism. Humiliation heaped on willing supplicants subjected to shaming exhortation and judgement echoes the miserable dishonesty of alienating employment and institutional relationships. Trailblazing Cameron's 'Big Society', the sub-Darwinian lottery logic peaks in Channel 4's *The Secret Millionaire* – worthy survival under compassionate capitalism depends on fitting the shallow prejudices of charitable predators, with the majority left to rot. Throughout the genre, though, fashionable counselling-babble about inadequate bodily and interpersonal health conceals morbid fascination with regimenting women in traditional caring, nurturing and parenting roles. Myths and fairytales of a 'Victorian values' bourgeois nuclear unit assuage fears by way of reinforcing forlorn hopes for an advancement that has stalled – hence being benchmarks for contemporary gloss across popular documentary and dramatic entertainment. However, a range of recent, less commercially obsequious films buck the trend, scrutinising personal and family dysfunctions among the middle- and upper-classes – whose trials and tribulations it's perhaps timely to dwell on, as the Old Etonians cover up the failings of the rich by hammering the poor with renewed gusto. A brief survey below sketches some contours in these rather nebulous realms of cinematic endeavour.



I. Family Values

In Loco Parentis

Pungent purgatives for romantic fantasies of family integrity feature isolated couples and offspring whose complacent coherence, based on carefully cultivated codes of conduct, crumbles in the face of sundry real or imagined threats to self-sufficiency. Michael Haneke's typically vicious *Funny Games* (Austria 1997; remade in America in 2008) twists home invasion horror motifs in an escalating ballet of bland pleasantries between teenage interlopers and victims unable to adjust to the psychopathic translation of civilised manners. Elsewhere, contradictions of internal motivation, explicit rationalisation and external ramification are less simplistically Manichean. Lucia Puenzo's *XXY* (Argentina 2007) postulates a teenager's polysexuality as an abomination her guardians must exorcise, for her/his own good given society's intolerance, but the child's insistence on uncertain autonomy leaves their benevolent authority in tatters. Expanding manic protectiveness to surreal proportions, Ursula Meier's *Home* (Switzerland 2009) shatters a static rural idyll as a motorway opens on its doorstep. The adolescent daughter sensibly hits the road as mum, dad and her siblings breezeblock the cottage into a fortress repelling the outside world, whereupon they immediately start suffocating and sheepishly deconstruct their own handiwork. Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (Greece 2009) then balefully revives paternalistic omnipotence in a grotesque tragicomedy of ad hoc home miseducation, including nonsense language and forced incest, with self-harm the only sane rite of passage. Parallelwise, in Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (Denmark 2009) a liberal marriage literally self-destructs after an infant's accidental death, in a physical and emotional bloodbath of mutual recrimination and disgust.



Nuclear Family Fallout

If pretensions of kinship wellbeing readily implode in hermetically-sealed quarantine, neither do surrounding communities escape contamination from its malfunctioning idealisation. In Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (France 2005), videotapes of their stylish Paris home are delivered to affluent intellectuals and their twelve year-old son. The partnership unravels as they wrestle with memory, guilt and denial once the anonymous 'stalker' also shoots the husband's childhood home and a grubby high-rise flat – the current address of the son of his parents' domestic servants, banished to an orphanage when they were among hundreds of Algerian protestors killed by police. Exploring how history dovetails individual biography and social hierarchy, the film punctures the self-serving vanity of elite Western superiority – the mystery thriller structure matching audience puzzlement with the couple's efforts to conceal from themselves their psychic preponderance of evasion and hypocrisy. Infantile envy wrecking subaltern lives may seem a heavy-handed allegory, even with class and race hatred still fundamental to Eurocentric society. But emotional and cognitive patterns conducive to oppression are nurtured early in the egos and cultures of the established middle-classes, operating precisely through misrecognition and displacement cemented by rationalisation and aestheticisation. Haneke's nailing of the discreet karma of the bourgeoisie is, nevertheless, tangentially optimistic here. Though surreptitiously embedded in the narrative, the present younger generations' directly solidaristic rebellion exposes dissembling moral dispositions among elders whose comfort presupposes ignoring the appalling social roots of its constitution.

The *White Ribbon* (Germany 2009) finds the same writer-director resuming normal service, hubristically delving into the founding fallacies of twentieth-century barbarism but offering no redemption for benighted fruit of rotten ancestry. A feudal Prussian village's festering network of baronial condescension and cruelly austere burgerdom births a malevolent 1914 cohort of diversely resentful youngsters countering peremptory patriarchal corruption with murderous delinquency – with blame displaced by default onto long-suffering, if incipiently bolshy, local serfs. Immaculate black and white cinematography enhances a metaphorical condensation of conditions facilitating the rise of Nazism and its apparently seamless acceptance, but too much real historical texture is obliterated to convince. Conversely, *Babel* (USA 2006) overeggs the postmodern pudding, cherry-picking multiple international issues from the progressive zeitgeist. This third collaboration with writer Guillermo Arriaga concludes Alejandro González Iñárritu's

depiction of contemporary collisions of fate, from class divisions in *Mexico City* (Amores Perros, 2000) and suburban US ruminations on the meaning of existence (*21 Grams*, 2003) to a worldwide web of violent correlation. *Babel*'s Berber herders are framed as terrorists when an American tourist is accidentally wounded, derailing her husband's attempt to salve her unhappiness, while back home their kids and illegal nanny fall foul of border police after attending a Mexican wedding. Elsewhere a well-off Tokyo teenage deaf-mute juggles frustrated sexuality, grief at her mother's suicide, and the neglectfulness of a father whose generosity, it transpires, originally set the story in motion.

Babel's deft manipulation of narrative fragments and jumbled timelines weaves love and family melodramas across the planet with the pointed MacGuffin of power from the barrel of a gun. Disparities of wealth and mobility determine both the scale of fulfilment realistically sought and the consequences of mistakes and misfortunes. So when subsistence lifestyle encounters Third World realpolitik, embryonic imaginings of a safer future are stillborn. Meanwhile, the neo-colonial service economy exhausts its bondservants in callous class apartheid, with the relatively affluent blind to the human costs of what they take for granted. Their self-obsession insulated by consumerism allows them neither to connect meaningfully with each other nor avoid trampling over the less fortunate they depend on. The miscommunication hinted in the title flows not from faulty cultural or linguistic translation, but the contradictions of underlying sociopolitical conceptual frameworks shaping comprehension and action. The characters' negotiations of corresponding institutional discourses which regulate lives and constrain potential nonetheless yield misery for rich and poor alike – with outcomes far starker for those whose interests are marginalised most. *Babel* may scarcely capture deep structures of domination radiating globally through social fabrics, but it does underscore that, beyond men's self-important posturing and decidedly unfunny games, the most poignant pressure-points devolve the onus onto women's labours maintaining bodies, souls and socialisation.

II. The Welfare of Queens

Fertility Rites and Wrongs

If breeding is a fundamental biosocial function of femininity, its primal mystique occasions febrile connections between resource control, cultivation and acculturation. Transcending elite bloodlines, nervousness around reproduction percolates down hierarchies of privilege, now prompting proliferating technical and discursive regulatory apparatuses. With the affluent increasingly experiencing the practical obstacle of difficulty conceiving, so viable biomass must be harvested from elsewhere – accomplished electively in Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are Alright* (USA 2010), whose enlightened lesbian moms share sperm donation. Their curious kids inconveniently reintroduce the originally anonymous passive male member into the household, destabilising its sedimentation into patriarchal order and unruly earthmotherhood – with resolution partly hingeing on the offhand dismissal of faithful subordinates whose distress isn't even noticed. Götz Spielmann's *Revanche* (Austria 2009), on the other hand, admirably balances a hapless lumpenprole's dangerous virility against the upright, uptight sterility generally strangling fulfilment all round.

However, vexatious lower-class surpluses of fecundity but fatal shortfalls in other forms of capital almost invariably precipitate unequal exchange – most evidently in Laurent Cantet's *Heading South* (France 2006), whose middle-aged female sex tourists mercilessly vampirise young



Haitian masculinity in a self-defeating addiction to ephemeral satisfaction. John Sayles' *Casa de los Babys* (USA 2003) similarly flays a bunch of middle-income Americans prospecting south of the border among those with no socio-economic option but to cash-in the fruit of their wombs. The primitively accumulating adopters neither acknowledge the trade's obscene ethics nor empathise with their benefactresses, so consumed are they by the magical promise of infantile possession. Ben Affleck's *Gone, Baby, Gone* (USA 2007) then poses even more baldly the dilemmas arising from differentially classed valuations of need and care, when borderline innercity mothers are clandestinely robbed by rogue public servants seeking their own domestic salvation.

Servicing the Domestic Economy

Even given material and cultural wherewithals securely in place, though, holding home and hearth productively together takes its toll. Treating mature order as mere veneer, Lucrecia Martel's depictions of the Argentinian provincial bourgeoisie see adults as essentially arrogant children, characterising in form and content their aimless anomie and compulsive moral confusion combined with unthinking diffidence and contempt towards the lower classes. *The Headless Woman* (2008) further explodes conservative pretensions of propertied propriety, excavating fetid depths of family dynamics whose contradictions radiate outwards to overdetermine domination, with distraction and disavowal simultaneously facilitating class stratification's real violence and concealing its beneficiaries' responsibility. The titular middle-aged dentist anchors an extended tribe busy with the trivial trials and tribulations befitting their station, barely registering the army of indigenous minions doing the donkeywork. One day she fears she may have accidentally run over one of their youngsters in the rain. Horrified, she daren't go back to check, sinking into almost catatonic detachment about the damage possibly done – primarily to her flattering self-image. Still, the genteel everyday sheen scarcely suffers apart from her nearest and dearest closing ranks in assurance that the problem has gone away, despite not even existing in the first place – collusive reconciliation eventually being signalled by minor cosmetic renewal, and lo and behold, history is rewritten.

Bold technical disjunctions layer allusion and metaphor, with deliberately awkward framing, focus and camera movement obscuring crucial details to powerfully evoke fractured mermory and perception. Flirtation with generic thriller conventions dissolves into pervasive dreamlike

anxiety as visual non-sequiturs highlight the dialogic banality and dissembling of milieux devotedly avoiding awareness. The ambient noise and incongruous pop soundtrack jar any seamless simulation of experience, forcing viewers to see through the eyes of an anti-heroine in abject disarray. Paradoxically, Martel's surgical precision stems from deep love for her family but hatred of its institutional prototype for societal structure, whereas vagaries of desire ruin individual and collective integrity and cohesion while promising liberation from the dead hand of civilisation as we know it. These dialectics resonate strongly with Argentina's trajectory – the murderous military Junta years whose horrors resist attention, through to current economic and social crises which once seemed liable to prompt revolution. Yet beyond parochial detail, light is undoubtedly shed on universal concerns – not least, the perennially fashionable refusal among middle-classes everywhere to acknowledge the profound political implications of their identity.

Two more South American tales purportedly prioritise insubordinate female perspectives in specifying their parasitisation. Sebastián Silva's *The Maid* (Chile 2009) intimately portrays a misanthropic housekeeper whose lifeblood drains in drudgery sustaining petulant employers. Meanwhile Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (Peru 2008) pits indigenous endurance against civilised savagery – first neoconservatively in sexual atrocity during 1980s guerilla insurgencies, then neoliberally in the plunder of cultural inheritance. But the latter's capricious perpetrator is surely the director's alter-superego projecting a rapacious other. Moreover, both films' cheerful lower-class life, along with Silva's infinitely patient mistress, represent classic ruses displacing bad faith – the weight of the world's phantasmically rosy glow mitigating guilt while validating objectifying sentiment. No such palliative pathos punctuates Claire Denis' mordant *White Material* (France 2009), whose European plantation owner desperately rushes to extract a last harvest of West African coffee before civil war overruns her. Indentured locals give up the collaborative ghost en masse, her husband has jumped ship, and the son sinks into psychotic stupor – before fitfully rousing to join drug-addled child rebels routinely butchered by government forces whose leaders vie for remaining crumbs. Her imperial majesty thus left barren to face the karmic storm, the end-credit dedication – “To all the fearless young rascals” – nonetheless plants seeds of hope among catastrophe's progeny even if no nourishable grounds are intellectually identifiable on its biopolitical terrain.

III. A Poverty of Aspiration

Downwardly Mobile Makeovers

Fortunately for them, however, Western matriarchs need no longer persevere with patriarchal overdetermination, thanks to feminisms’ erosion of male supremacist hegemony. With faultlines prised open in the combined and uneven development of liberal individualisation and commodity fetishism, further lines of flight become available to women of means to seek passionate independent self-realisation without shouldering burdens of guilt for the wreckage. But with newly sovereign selves under injunction to grow and flourish, the flypapered pedestal of the goddess loses its allure and madonna-whore trapdoors their purchase. Archaic romance trajectories then unravel, whereupon costume melodrama revisionisms reassert the last instance of capital frittered away from the commanding heights once libidinal investment refuses to valorise the same old straitjackets. Pascale Ferran’s aseptic *Lady Chatterley* (France 2006) thus dilutes D.H. Lawrence’s surrender to shameless



carnality, emphasising sensual mutualism in a liaison still ultimately foundering on rocks of proprietary and polite acceptability. Saul Dibb’s *The Duchess* (UK 2008) similarly exploits Lady Di’s postfeminist fairytragedy in a coffeetable biopic of her nineteenth century Devonshire precursor – complete with burlesque couture, uncourtly dalliance and tepid pseudopolitical dabbling. Back in the present, Luca Guadagnino’s *I Am Love* (Italy 2009) honours Antonioni and Visconti’s wallowing in exquisite decadence, with a perfect nouveau riche wife plumping for middlebrow epicurean earthiness to abandon her ice-cold industrialist aristocrats just as they sell out to global speculators. Affairs become even thornier as passage down class-structural snakes-and-ladders may tip miscreants into social oblivion rather than marginally less rarefied airs and graces – where pernicious double standards preserve men’s prerogatives to control purse-strings and pursue promiscuous relations. These open secrets intelligibly populate entertainment genres pitched at pressurised middle-class women, whose ‘polymorphous perversities’ are judged far more punitively not least because, amidst the manic multitasking maintaining domestic machinery, serious peccadilloes are harder to hide. Worse,

indulging them accrues costs which threaten the whole inherently tenuous house of cards of serene status, undermining its ability to reproduce itself socially and materially – and thus tainted feminine goods represent occupational hazards for smug illusions of security demanding strict cultural policing. So intolerable conduct should take a battering in Roger Eyre’s spiteful *Notes on a Scandal* (UK 2006), which instead strives to forgive a beautiful bohemian schoolteacher’s paedophilia. This gymnastic moral contortion is achieved by excoriating her bitter and twisted spinster ally as a psychosocial leech barging into professional bastions but incapable of capitalising on coveted upward drift. The spectacularly differential denigration is compounded by angelic male innocence, unerringly reinforcing righteously inequitable battlelines of sex and station where the emotive force of shame cements respectability’s rule.

Disrespect Agendas

Though the bourgeois edifice can survive mothers teetering over the cultural abyss, if somewhat depleting its haughty cachet, disillusionment with the alienating repercussions of recuperation can’t be quashed indefinitely. Anne Fontaine’s *Natalie* (France 2003) naughtily mocks the two-faced mythos of fidelity to the nuclear family’s alms race when a high-powered matron turns private eye, hiring a presentable escort to prove suspected spousal philandery. But the mischievous temptress intuits from the tricks of her trade that disgust disguises desire. So she transgresses job descriptions and fabricates evidence for her employer’s delectation, seducing her with erotic embroideries of her own prurient wishes. Fontaine wisely holds back from healing the resulting open wounds of class and sexuality – whereas Atom Egoyan’s bloated remake, *Chloe* (USA 2009), slams the penthouse door shut before the whore can bolt. With pompous angst humourlessly misconstruing the source’s subversive refusal of a traditionally sticky end for a femme fatale’s attraction, he transforms the women’s crossborder ambivalence into equalised frustrated yearnings for what the other is mistakenly assumed to safely possess. But this enlightened evenhandedness wishes away vastly unbalanced forces mustered in support – a repressed reality which returns in thoroughly reactionary restoration. Dangerous instability is doubly annihilated – tellingly, when the upstart arriviste turns her beady eye on the children – sacrificing both the stirring soul of the wife and its reflection in the broken body of the lover and her degraded lower feminine faculties.

Denis Dercourt’s *The Page Turner* (France 2006) is another nubile aspirant sabotaging marriage’s sanctity – born now of envious hatred rather than need, let alone playful gender-baiting. Her audition ruined by a visiting star’s casual carelessness, a piano prodigy turns the tables years later insinuating herself as indispensable factotum. Sham adoring devotion fools the self-obsessed diva so successfully that she falls in love, whereupon her erstwhile paramour vanishes – in vitriol inverting the already ruined hopes of her humble family’s investment in the future. That any creeping class-conscious promise of sociosexual intercourse can never be trusted, given the alien incomprehensibility of the harbingers, is thereby brought home once more. Nevertheless, its heroines occasionally genuinely burn sundry bridges of accrued familial, material and embodied distinction, irrespective of cost-benefit calculation. Catherine Corsini’s *Leaving* (France 2008) slyly foregrounds the modern moneyed overconfidence that there is no alternative, contriving a bereft husband’s cost-cutting coming back to haunt him as his wife escapes with the subcontracted handyman. A subsequent campaign of legal and financial attrition makes explicit the hostile instrumentality inherent in objectified relations miming mature realism which also catalysed her betrayal. The joyous fleshly intensity of the adultress in renewed youthful fire yields grim determination, but every turn of the bitter cuckold’s credit-crunching screw inflicts vindictive

indignity for her audacity. With negotiable options negated and even contrite rapprochement intolerable, she chooses life as a fugitive murderer.

Lucia Puenzo’s *The Fish Child* (Argentina 2009) comparably gestures at conflictually compulsive rites of passage, before morphing inexorably into another irreversible insurrection against affluence. A sullen daughter of a seedy Buenos Aires judge prepares elopement with a sexually exploited Paraguayan maidservant, but the latter’s framing for his honour’s execution prompts descent into overwrought noir and sex-slave jailbreak to salvage romance. The title’s mythic Guaraní guardian of dead children’s spirits echoes everywhere – lamenting Argentina’s specific state-sanctioned ‘disappeared’ as well as generic exiles to economic necessity; now extending to those relinquishing comfortable cushioning, plus all disappointed sophists of bourgeois order. With its imaginary societal institution irredeemably deathly – condensed in the sordid prison-industrial Oedipal complex the implicated magistrate threatened to expose – his family had itself already expired. Only structural nodality and worldly and cultural infrastructure ever gave it an approximation of life, but when those labouring low to animate it vacate the premises, along with the artistic goods the lovers filch to fund exodus, nothing of substance remains bar the stench. Moreover, the screenplay’s apparently proletarian agent provocateur of universal lust herself actually originated in contrasting constellations of incestuous privilege – more poignantly deploring the tragic sins of paternal power, but no longer pretending to appreciate the positions of those who never harboured such vain hopes to be punctured.

IV. The Socio-Economic Crisis

Failures of Psycho-Social Cohesion

Unsurprisingly, children reared amidst such destructive patterns of intimate passion deeply internalise their elders’ disaffection. Supposedly secure emotional boundaries and channels for cathexis deliver, at best, anxious dissatisfaction bequeathing confused fledgling egos guided by neither coherent models for interpersonal fantasy nor intelligible templates organising desire into agency. However, reliably banal economic flows nourishing vicissitudes of bodies and souls are more readily intuited – with a plethora of personality deviations deploying the self’s flesh and blood adornment as manageable social capital, encouraged by media commodifications of callow youthful sexuality. So, reversing *American Beauty*’s (Sam Mendes, USA 2000) parental regression to adolescence when the suburban family fractures, David Ross’ disreputable *The Babysitters* (USA 2007) pursues its incestuous logic with high-school senior prostitutes tricking college funds from each other’s fathers. This film’s hopeless plea for orthodox Oedipality matches the dishonesty of British television’s *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (Lucy Prebble, 2007-10), whose happy high-class hooker lifestyle entrepreneurship conceals its real-life source’s temporary pragmatics to pay tuition fees. Elsewhere, in more believably callous worlds, desperate contortions of sexual subjectification yield predictably despiriting results.

Somewhat superfluously, David Mackenzie’s *Spread* and Steven Soderbergh’s *The Girlfriend Experience* (both USA 2009) convey the self-defeating anaesthesia of personable young American gigolos and escorts exchanging material security for mechanical simulations of erotic intensity with surrogate parent clients – a process irrevocably spoiling any mutually meaningful or lasting relations outside of cynical manipulation. More intriguingly, in Guillermo Arriaga’s overwrought *The Burning Plain* (USA 2008) a woman’s self-harm manifest in perilous one night stands stems from childish anguish at her matricidal interruption of a clandestine affair – whereas a sex addict in Clarke Gregg’s *Choke* (USA 2008) endlessly seeks climactic lack of affect after a manically exciting and unstable boyhood. But irrespective of the exotic or mundane specifics

of disturbance, hysterical efforts to square its circular intrapsychic arguments eventually exhaust motivation to persevere. Various means of escape then aim to rid the self of unbearable attachment – whether in isolated communion with idealised nature in Sean Penn’s *Into The Wild* (USA 2007), an upper-class pregnant junkie’s refusal of parental regeneration in Francois Ozon’s *The Refuge* (France 2009) or, in Rebecca Miller’s *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee* (USA 2009), the wholesale suppression of individuality as trophy wife.

Sadly the dynamics of hollow characters seeking impossible completion prevent them stewing in their own solipsistic juices, fanning out into threadbare fabrics of sociality with markedly more warp than weft. But the radical unknowability of others lights fuses of furious frustration whose tantrums explode childish romance – in cretinous designer paranoia in Doug Liman’s *Mr and Mrs Smith* (USA 2005) or more realistically restrained European cosmopolitanism in Maren Ade’s *Everyone Else* (Germany 2009). Alternatively, friendship networks bear brunts of shallow self-satisfied snobbery, from drearily vacuous teen melodramas and romcoms to tedious timeless middle-class enclaves blissfully detached from vulgar hardship substituting bitching about fashionable distinction for guts and bite – witness *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* or the *Four Weddings/Notting Hill/Bridget Jones* franchise splenetically trashed in Stephen Frears’ *Tamara Drewe* (UK 2010). In fact, no matter what fairytale sidetracks paper over the cracks – from timid hipster mysticism tapping magical supernatural power to any number of surreal serial thrillers, identity assassins and agents secret even from themselves – the old economy’s forces and government media men simply can’t put Humpty’s greedy frightened babies back together again; and therefore we all suffer the consequences.

Anti Social Bourgeois Orders

Rendering explicit neoliberal narcissism’s inexorable projection of self-hatred, a rich-kid house-party in Gael Garcia Bernal’s *Deficit* (Mexico 2007) degenerates into venal discord counterpointing the corrupt downfall of financier parents. Olly Blackburn’s *Donkey Punch* (UK 2007) then twists teen horror tropes, with sexual venture capital coming unstuck when stockbroker-belt scions lure onto daddy’s yacht package-tour lasses more worldly than anticipated. And if it’s symptomatic how the hard-won spoils of class war are risked for whimsical cheap thrills, Sidney Lumet’s *Before The Devil Knows You’re Dead* (USA 2007) turns the hatchet-job terminally inward – its botched smalltime heist a rancid family collapse whose offspring hyenas pick emotional, economic and bodily bones of hapless petit-bourgeois forebears. But despite tentatively prophesying late-capitalist nihilism’s universal disaster, such theatrical experiments rarely generalise circumscribed circumstances to entire dysfunctioning communities – as hard-boiled down in Michael Winterbottom’s *The Killer Inside Me* (USA 2010).

This adaptation of Jim Thompson’s 1952 novel trades dark literary interior monologue for vivid visualisation. Concealing raw hatred, Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford’s affably dim Deep-South demeanour discursively bludgeons everyone he encounters – thinly veiling narcissistic self-pity which evaporates when imagined slights threaten the grandiose paranoia typical of borderline syndromes. So, professional and personal entanglement with prostitute Joyce punctures his character armour, unleashing suppressed hostility and undermining fatally fragile boundaries in relation to childhood sweetheart Amy. Ford’s pathology stems from sadistic fathering in a miserable middle-class background, contextualising his sexual proclivities and modus operandi, but in mistaking cod-Freudian conceit for moral core Winterbottom expunges the author’s withering cultural commentary. For example, here’s the anti-hero’s rejoinder to a doomed patsy dubbing him fair and honest:

“We’re living in a funny world, kid, a peculiar



civilization. The police are playing crooks in it, and the crooks are doing police duty. The politicians are preachers, and the preachers are politicians ... The Bad People want us to have more dough, and the Good People are fighting to keep it from us. It’s not good for us ... If we all had all we wanted to eat, we’d crap too much. We’d have inflation in the toilet paper industry ... That’s about the size of some of the arguments I’ve heard” (Orion Books edition, 2002, p.105).

Adding that most avoid awareness of how screwed up things are by internalising rules of respectability and scapegoating non-conformists, Thompson plausibly accounts for particular horrors and hypocrisies entirely from serially homicidal sociopathic attitudes, yet ascribing equal culpability to biography and social institution in nurturing such outcomes.

The film’s glossy 1950s West Texas supplants Ford’s alienated understanding with transparent reality – spectacularising extreme transgression to ignore the inherently collusive nature of mainstream morality and continuity between exploitative societal hierarchy and individual monstrosity. Here, lurid exceptions masquerade among comforting norms, parroting the psychotic logic of detached compulsion which drives ‘freaks’ like Ford as well as other exemplary embodiments of capitalism’s congenital antisociality. The deaths of twinned femmes fatales are thus anatomised with morbid fascination but merit mere workmanlike paragraphs in the book illustrating macho prejudice – Joyce seeking power’s covert endorsement, risking expulsion by polite society which craves her; Amy demanding overt affirmation to avoid the former’s fate. Their killer’s conduct stands for patriarchal relations generally, where the sadomasochistic perversity of domination is reinforced through denial – desire being fatal because it must be repressed and displaced into partial, rigid pathways destined to frustrate and escalate. But with women’s passive complicity now explained as complementary personality defects, masculine control materialises as natural order – repeating the fetish’s psychological purpose and rewarding feminist complaints of simple misogyny. But Ford also models the constitutive camouflage of false self in class stratification, stifling offences to pious propriety which jeopardise the interests of the powerful. Closing the gap between his distorted apperceptions of his lovers and their own potential agendas arguably mirrors Thompson’s misanthropy, but his pessimism subtly pinpointed bourgeois society’s incapacity to reliably apprehend, care about, or benefit those at the bottom of its heap.

V. The Big Bad Society

Abstracting small-scale doldrums to wider world disorder, Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park* (USA 2000) indecently overviews an English stately pastoral standing for the universe of Western incivility – like younger ensemble exponents Paul Thomas Anderson and Iñárritu, only patchily overcoming mannered modernist stylisation. Arrogant overreach also cripples Lars Von Trier’s faux-Brechtian *Dogville* and *Manderlay* (Denmark 2003 and 2006), creditably failing to entwine imperious ruling-class vanity and stubborn subaltern backwardness. Similarly, pretentious television dramas aspiring to literary novelistic ambit usually prefer pandering to power in mimicking epochal insight, while more trenchant critiques in *The Sopranos* (David Chase, USA 1999-2007) and *The Wire* (David Simon/Ed Burns, USA 2002-8) succumb to analogous strangleholds of tragic determinism and naturalistic fixation. At least *Red Riding* (Tony Grisoni, UK 2009) intractably dredges the obscene unconscious underbelly of mainstream morality facilitating Thatcherism’s

malice – perhaps glimpsing the ex-Soviet Bloc shock doctrine’s cannibalistic sex-slavery whose criminal inhumanity David Cronenberg’s *Eastern Promises* (UK 2007) magnifies. But obsessive negative nostalgia and defunct defences of heroic individuality preempt dialectics – yielding resigned fait accomplis prefiguring and rubberstamping renewed barbarism. So the present exploration concludes with a film conceived and executed well after the financial meltdown which supposedly changed everything, which also secretes within itself a germinal appreciation that another way is possible.

Juan José Campanella’s *The Secret In Their Eyes* (Argentina 2009) first flirts with derivative cop capers, as retired prosecutor’s assistant Benjamin reminisces about his mid-1970s drunken genius sidekick Pablo, wisecracking like Latin Starsky and Hutches battling the corrupt Buenos Aires justice system prior to dictatorship. Cheap and cheerful kitsch then darkens, cross-fertilising crime procedural, romance and political thriller to meditate on love and hate, guilt and regret – melodramatically contrasting passions and obsessions and their intimate effects where, despite awkward shifts of tone, the structural flexibility leaves many questions satisfactorily unanswered. Stressing the partners’ emotional and investigative synergy reflecting shared humble origins, flashbacks revisit a traumatic case – a raped and slaughtered newlywed whose bereft husband trusted their premature assurance of closure. They eventually identify the psychopath responsible, but empathetic solidarity sours with our hero’s shy infatuation with aristocratic high-flyer boss Irene, who equally hesitantly reciprocates – neither summoning the cojones to act. Benjamin’s departmental nemesis springs the killer from life sentence to death squad operations, whereupon his protests precipitate Pablo’s assassination. He escapes thanks to Irene’s contacts, and back in the present the couple belatedly shack up.

Social and official constraints on perception and comprehension here influence immediate action and retrospective assimilation in individual and collective biography, so this brief encounter with vicious, pernicious history might resonate with anyone’s shared suffering. But whose attitudes, situations and potentials count? The lower-class victims had no protection against brutal reality to allow guilty distance from the distress of others – whereas, like his quarry, Benjamin ‘got out of jail free’. Representing social democracy’s uneasy monopoly of professional middle- and progressive upper-classes, our paramours’ personal truth and reconciliation helps them imagine that everyone’s satisfactorily moved on. But liberal pretensions secured no justice – their entire shambolic careers as well as private lives, implicitly, wastes of time – stranding the grieving widower to deal alone with the repercussions, in a direct, robust, unmediated manner their worldviews cannot accommodate. Furthermore, specific historical circumstances expose another secret in this story’s eyes. Its brave new world of affectionate national partnership, settling unfinished business from a painful past, embarks in 1999. Yet within two years Argentina’s casino capitalism catastrophically crashed, much earlier than elsewhere, leaving millions of lives again in ruins. Wishing away the material foundations of social crisis thus simply increases the likelihood that projected solutions remain flimsy fantasies, destined to precipitate tragedy and farce – as well as critical acclaim, misreading the fluffy denouement’s red-herring as redemptive resolution. Unless, that is, ordinary folk forgo mourning the inability of their ‘bettters’ to safeguard their lifeworlds, and take it upon themselves together to hold the future to account.

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Poverty Porn and the Broken Society

Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock

Once again, people experiencing poverty are represented as among the key ‘problem’ groups in the UK. Nothing new there – since the mid to late nineteenth century, with relatively few contrary periods in between, people in poverty have been held up as in some way culpable in their own predicament. So what makes our current period of particular significance? In this paper we explore some of the ways in which poverty is being constructed and people in poverty represented. From the outset we want to locate this within the context of the deep and far reaching assault on public services, social welfare, and on the most disadvantaged groups in society that have recently been unleashed by the Conservative/ Liberal Democrat UK coalition government, accelerating and deepening the 13 years of New Labour attacks which set the stage for this current onslaught.

We are living in the deepest recession and economic crisis since the 1930s, yet for successive governments and for large sections of the media there is another crisis, one characterised as key to the economic ills which grip much of UK society today – as the title of a November 2001 Labour conference had it – ‘Malingering and Illness Deception’¹. Underpinning this political discourse is an even more explicitly US-style workfare model, framing ‘the problem’ as one of the individual behaviour of the least powerful, those living in poverty.

This political approach is accompanied by a pervasive media assault on people experiencing poverty – including some of the most disadvantaged groups. The assault comes in a number of formats: A 24/7 news media, both print and television, that seizes on any example of ‘dysfunctionality’ in poor working class communities – which works to both construct and reinforce dominant attitudes to poverty and welfare more generally, while at the same time expressing largely middle class fears and senses of distrust of ‘the poor’. These then serve to harden attitudes to poverty and to justify harsher welfare policies. Alongside these, a range of television documentaries, reality TV shows, and the like, which also allow ‘experts’ to adjudicate on the faults of working class and disadvantaged lifestyles, emphasising the need for self-improvements and self-help². Concurrently, other programmes offer millionaire philanthropists the opportunity to dispense their largess, or very small parts of it, to a range of causes and cases deemed worthy of such.

TV programmes such as *Jeremy Kyle*, *Tricia, Secret Millionaire*, *Saints and Scroungers* are among the most notable of a seemingly growing list that fit in what is now increasingly being referred to as the ‘poverty porn’ genre³. There is a long history of such sermonizing exposure in the UK, echoed in nineteenth century travelogues among the urban poor, narratives of ‘hidden Britain’, print and photographic images of urban squalor, and, increasingly, poverty porn is being played out on the web where anything goes in terms of representations of ‘the poor’. The messages given are pervasive; reflecting and forging an anti-welfarism that fits neatly with state agendas for welfare ‘reform’ and ‘austerity policies’ and legitimates them. Together then, with the expressions of middle class fears and distrust, there is also a fascination with poverty and the supposedly deviant lifestyles of those affected – where viewers of moral outrage are encouraged to find the worst and weakest moments of people’s lives also funny and entertaining. This is offered up for consumption on a wider cross-class

basis – yet it is clear that it reflects middle class antipathies and angst while at the same time delineating in working class communities who the ‘real’ poor are that need to be controlled. In this respect it plays to wider government- and media-generated narratives about ‘scroungers’ and the ‘undeserving’.

The pornography of it all is especially clear when crimes and anti-social behaviour are involved. However, we also need to recognise that such ‘porn’ is not always read or interpreted in the same way, witness the debate and furore around BBC Scotland’s *The Scheme* broadcast in mid 2010.

Welfare in Crisis?

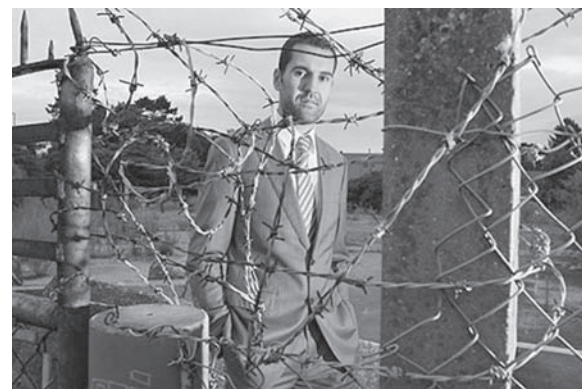
Central to our understanding of the contemporary valorisations of ‘the poor’ as ‘problem population’ are a series of anti-welfare narratives and ideologies which are working not only to construct people in poverty as ‘other’,⁴ but which operate in different ways to harden public attitudes to poverty and to those experiencing it, as well as paving the way for much tougher and punitive welfare policies⁵. Hardly a week goes by without some media story which purports to depict some episode or crisis around social welfare in some form or another. Indeed, writing this in early December 2010, the front-page headline in *The Sun* (the most widely read tabloid in Britain) boldly announces: ‘Iain Duncan Smith on benefits Britain’. The article slated:

“Britain’s shirkers’ paradise shame with hordes of work shy benefit claimants was blamed last night for much of our economic mess. Paying a fortune to the five million on handouts is a major reason the UK’s deficit soared to a crippling £155billion, Tory minister Iain Duncan Smith told *The Sun*. The Work and Pensions Secretary vowed to press on with the challenge of ending the benefits culture – which he called a deep embarrassment for a country once known as the workshop of the world. *He said: “We have to get Britain to rediscover what was great about this country – the culture of work.”*”⁶

Immediately, Duncan Smith was again shown to be playing fast and loose with statistics, in particular his claims that out-of-work benefits are “a huge part of the reason” for Britain’s deficit. The numbers are lower than in 1997 and the cost increase since the start of the current recession has been due to rising unemployment⁷ – to the point of the UK Statistics Authority rebuking the Welfare minister over ‘serious deficiencies’ in data use.⁸

This is about the coalition reconceptualising the language of ‘fairness’⁹ in the context of a deep economic crisis as means to savage welfare and public services: ‘Is it fair that we the hard workers, we the middle classes, we who are striving to do well for ourselves and our families have to bear the brunt of the recession?’ It is also a story of social welfare in crisis. Such narratives stretch beyond stories of ‘benefits shirkers’ to daily reports about hospital waiting lists, inefficient public sector bureaucracies, through to declining standards of service delivery or the monitoring of such delivery. But over and above these everyday accounts there are a larger set of anxieties around social welfare which focus on particular incidents and episodes as representative of more fundamental problems with social welfare. Three examples serve to illustrate this point:

In 2007 the death of Baby P in London and the subsequent enquiry and trial (of her mother and her partner) in 2009 highlighted like few other cases the absolute horror of violence against and harm of a child within the private spaces



of families. This is a story of a failure in welfare services, put firmly at the door of social workers.¹⁰ There is little that the right wing media like more than being able to pinpoint the blame for failing public services at the door of apparently failing public sector workers, irrespective of any evidence to the contrary. That child protection systems broke down here or were insufficiently rigorous in the first place is seen as emblematic of much more fundamental problems with social welfare.

The second incident which we highlight concerned the conviction of the so-called Edlington Boys, who were convicted for torturing younger children in Doncaster, South Yorkshire, in 2009. Once more this is set in the context of arguments about the failure of welfare protection and again, as with Baby P, around stories of dysfunctional family life, cultures and lifestyles that are problematic or deviant in some form or another.

However, there are other more potent ideologies

at work that underpin, pervade and give potency to the range of anti-welfare stories that are in circulation today. These are characterised by a clear anti-welfare message that draws upon the long standing ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor distinction which today is couched in a language that talks of aspirational deficits and dysfunctional behaviours, an absence of social capital and a seemingly expanding range of moral and behavioural problems. This is illustrated by the Karen Matthews case which relates to other apparent crises of social welfare. The conviction of Matthews and her partner for the kidnapping of her nine year old daughter in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire in 2008, provoked a kind of backlash that had many of the features of a right-wing moral panic. Speaking after their sentencing in December 2008, Conservative leader David Cameron stated that:

“The verdict last week on Karen Matthews and her vile accomplice is also a verdict on our broken society. The details are damning. A fragmented family held together by drink, drugs and deception. An estate where decency fights a losing battle against degradation and despair. A community whose pillars are crime, unemployment and addiction. How can Gordon Brown argue that people who talk about a broken society are wrong? These children suffered at the very sharpest end of our broken society but all over the country are other young victims, too. Children whose toys are dad’s discarded drink bottles; whose role models are criminals, liars and layabouts; whose innocence is lost before their first milk tooth. What chance for these children? Raised without manners, morals or a decent education, they’re caught up in the same destructive chain as their parents. It’s a chain that links unemployment, family breakdown, debt, drugs and crime.”¹¹

Poverty, Moral Breakdown and Criminality

Cameron’s above quote both reflects wider discourses around, and re-asserts the alleged relationship between poverty, immorality, and crime. The principle targets of such assertions are the working-class poor including those in receipt of welfare benefits. Against the wealth of social scientific and criminological research that refutes common-sense claims that crime is more prevalent and destructive among these groups, it remains the case in popular discourse that people in poverty are assumed to be more immoral and criminally-inclined than their wealthy counterparts, and that often such assumptions are gendered, racist as well as classed. These are particularly potent in the context of contemporary anti-welfarism and both inform and are reproduced in media portrayals of disadvantaged social groups and places.

The ‘problem’ of poor families and communities is told and retold in the print and broadcast media as wreaking havoc on those directly affected but also on wealth and security of the ‘law-abiding majority’. Notions of a ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor and assumptions about the trouble the latter create are deeply rooted in social policies and popular culture historically. They have, however, been given renewed currency in the contemporary period in the wake of the worldwide financial crisis in 2008 and, in particular, in the response of governments to this crisis: the justification for spending cuts. Media coverage both follows and shapes official discourses; exaggerated stories and extreme examples used by newspapers are employed uncritically in official pronouncements to justify the claims being made.

Broken Britain and the Dysfunctional Poor

Under both New Labour and now with the Tory-led UK coalition government, there has been a revitalised assault on those living in poverty and in particular those in receipt of welfare. In recent years there has been an escalation of what amounts to little more than moralistic

scapegoating. There is a renewed political appetite for the condemnation of ‘poor’ places and people. The labels the ‘Broken Society’ and ‘Broken Britain’ have entered wider popular and media discourses to describe the social and moral health of society, and they feature with increasing regularity across a range of stories about public provision and future of welfare. As with many other anti-welfare narratives over recent decades, part of the potency and pervasiveness of the ‘Broken Society’ is that it is a plastic term, able to be deployed without evidence as an explanation for a hugely diverse assortment of social problems. For Conservatives such as Iain Duncan Smith and the Tory Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) there is an explicit argument that the broken and falling apart society has its roots in ‘broken families’ – teenage pregnancies, increasing numbers of one parent households living in a ‘dependency culture’, feature prominently in such perspectives. The CSJ identifies five poverty ‘drivers’: family breakdown, welfare dependency, educational failure, addiction to drugs and alcohol, and serious personal debt. Stable marriages, authoritative parenting, and a two-parent family life are pinpointed as central to ‘mending’ ‘Broken Britain’, thereby reducing levels of poverty. But for consecutive governments the primary route out of poverty has been propounded as through work. The barriers to employment, however, are regarded as matters of ‘habit’ and ‘culture’ and the unwillingness to be ‘flexible’ and ‘mobile’. There is no recognition of the structural nature of unemployment and long-term economic disinvestment.

‘Broken Britain’ is also portrayed in a ‘broken’ Scotland, or, more correctly, the identification of particular parts of Scotland as symbolic of such. Politicians have painted the stage set of sizeable elements of Scottish society as ‘broken’ and cast ‘Shettleston Man’ – a stereotypical workshy folk devil – as the perpetrator:

“This individual has low life expectancy. He lives in social housing, drug and alcohol abuse play an important part in his life and he is always out of work. His white blood cell count killing him directly as a result of his lifestyle and its lack of purpose.”¹²

A key moment in this new mythology was the 2008 Glasgow East by-election¹³. The hotly contested Westminster seat, previously a Labour stronghold, attracted much attention for the power struggles between New Labour – Gordon Brown – and the SNP – Scotland’s First Minister Alex Salmond. However, it wasn’t just the political battle that attracted the spotlight as politicians and the media brought the people of Glasgow East themselves to centre stage for public judgement. The presentation of Glasgow East was overwhelmingly negative, giving voice to a type of thinking that has long featured prominently in the reporting of poverty in disadvantaged urban areas across the UK, in constructing particular locales as ‘problem’ places and ‘welfare ghettos’¹⁴. Dramatic newspaper headlines focussed on premature death rates and persistently high and long-term unemployment. The new language of ‘worklessness’ became commonplace as an oversimplification of welfare receipt – use of the term ‘worklessness’ is stigmatising, pays no regard to unpaid labour, and is particularly pernicious as it implies that the ‘lacking’ is on the part of the individual rather than the labour market which is unwilling or unable to provide consistent, decent employment.

Such representations offered inadequate acknowledgement of how the East End of Glasgow suffered long-term economic decline and disinvestment in the second half of the twentieth century, following the dismantling of much of Scotland’s heavy and manufacturing industries. Journalists were quick to comment on other ‘problems’ in the area. In the *Independent* one commentator spoke of the ‘desolation’ of Easterhouse, and of ‘broken families’, that this is a ‘broken society’¹⁵. Glasgow East was viewed as a place of *misery*, of *apathy* and *despair* (read



‘demoralisation’ or moral inadequacy), a place containing ‘wasted highlands’¹⁶. *The Times* journalist Melanie Reid, while perhaps using the most headline-grabbing language referred to the council estates of the East End as ‘Glasgow’s Gauntanamo’.¹⁷

Media and political commentary acts to influence and shape each other, and visits to the Glasgow East constituency by David Cameron and Iain Duncan Smith played a key role in shaping much of the social commentary of the media during the election. Duncan Smith had visited the area in February 2008 to launch a Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) report, ‘Breakthrough Glasgow’, detailing what he identified as the key problems afflicting the area. Using a language that was soon to be the staple of many of the newspaper reports of the election, Glasgow East was held up to represent the ‘Broken Society’.

Welfare Dependency and Estate Cultures

Across much of this commentary, welfare provision is identified as the factor underpinning a range of social ills:

“For too long, people have been allowed to languish, trapped in a dependency culture that held low expectations of those living there and made no demands of them either. You only need to look at the social housing system that successive governments have pursued to realise why, on so many of these

estates, lone parenting, worklessness, failed education and addiction are an acceptable way of life. Over the years we have put all the most broken families, with myriad problems, on the same estates. Too few of the children ever see a good role model: for the dysfunctional family life is the norm.

Worse still, visiting vast Estates like Easterhouse... you realise that incentives to remain dependent far outweigh anything else....

To rectify this we need to accept that the welfare system has become part of this breakdown, giving perverse incentives to too many people. It needs to be changed. It needs to have a simple purpose: to move people from dependence to independence....

At the heart of this likes work, The system must help people to not only find work but also to remain in work, to get the ‘work habit’.”¹⁸

To foster the ‘work habit’ and ‘incentivise’ work the coalition government will, for example, require unpaid work (Mandatory Work Activity) for a specified period from those deemed to be the most intransigent claimants. Financial sanctions amounting to 100% withdrawal of benefits for a specified period will be imposed for those who fail to comply with the new conditionality regime.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Emergency Budget on 22nd June had already announced wide ranging changes to Housing Benefit and Housing Living Allowance (private sector) “to ensure that people on benefit are not living in accommodation that would be out of the reach of most people in work, creating a fairer system for low-income working families and for the taxpayer”²⁰. As this justification indicates, ‘fairness’ no longer refers to a notion of ‘redistribution’. Rather, ‘fairness’ is bound up with how it is imagined by ‘most people in work’ and ‘the taxpayer’ (although many who claim housing and related benefits are in work). The coalition government is reported to have set up a ‘Nudge Unit’ – formally known as a ‘Behavioural Insight Team’ – whose first task is to address ‘obesity, diet and alcohol’. Behavioural Economics, ‘operant conditioning’, marks the return of a psycho-political theory that rose up in the mid-20th century, called Behaviourism. It is based on the view “that individuals can be persuaded – ‘nudged’ – into making better choices for themselves without force or regulation”.²¹ The coalition agreement talks about “finding intelligent ways to encourage people to make better choices for themselves”²². The proponent of this approach, David Halpern, a behavioural economics expert, will also play a role in David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ project.

Our contention is that the behaviourist educational function made explicit in the ‘Nudge Unit’ is operating in many registers, including through policy programmes, forms of expertise, and through the state’s influence on the mass media and other ‘cultural systems’²³. The ways working-class families and communities are portrayed in the mass media in general, and ‘poverty porn’ in particular, can be read as part of this same educative process. The ‘normality’ of middle-class lives are contrasted with dysfunctional working-class families; ‘backward looking’ attitudes among the poor are rendered shameful and middle-class values associated with self-improvement and aspiration are revered in the messages conveyed.

From the Problem Estate to The Scheme

Another example of how poverty in contemporary Scotland is portrayed is provided by the four-part BBC reality television programme *The Scheme*, the first two parts of which were broadcast in May 2010. In this example the community of a deprived housing scheme, Onthank in Kilmarnock, was presented as entertainment for public consumption. The series provoked a great deal of debate and controversy across Scotland and beyond, reflected in considerable press coverage and presence on social networking sites and

online discussion forums. *The Scheme* purported to offer a warts ‘n’ all ‘reality-based’ documentary account of life in this particular housing scheme, although only a handful of households were the focus of the programme. It positioned the viewer in judgement over the behaviour and lifestyles of those exhibited.²⁴ In showcasing the problematic or dysfunctional aspects of family relationships, unemployment, alcohol or drug taking, and violence, without insight into the underlying causes (such as the devastating economic change in this part of East Ayrshire) or contexts (of widening social inequalities) of social problems, programme makers created a modern day equivalent of the carnival ‘freak show’.

One of the most forceful criticisms of *The Scheme* – and ‘poverty porn’ more generally – is that it provides a view of poverty and people experiencing poverty out of context; it offered a vision, and a very partial and flawed understanding of poverty which did not consider the underlying social and economic factors that work to generate and reproduce poverty over time. Instead, the focus was on one housing scheme, and on a few particular individuals and families within it, in isolation from the wider issues around poverty, disadvantage, and inequality across Scotland and the UK today. In this respect *The Scheme*, which is perhaps currently the best known programme of its kind, relied upon a largely cultural and behaviour-centred perspective, focused on the individual and family and on the generation of specific cultural and behavioural norms, lifestyles, which work to keep people in poverty.

There is an increasing interest among poverty researchers in what is now being referred to as ‘poverty porn’ of which *The Scheme* represents one particular format. This refers to the offering up of poverty and of ‘poor people’ for public entertainment. While some of this is played out on the web and in social networking sites, as well as in the popular press, more significant and potent is the ways in which the televisual media have begun to see in poverty – and its associated conditions – a means to cheap, popular, and populist entertainment. *Jeremy Kyle* and *Tricia* represent one end of this spectrum – and perhaps some of the best known examples of TV-based poverty porn. The question of who the audiences are for such programmes is a pertinent one. Advertisers have no compulsion in lining-up to be associated with these programmes in some shape or form. The advertisers and sponsors of ITV1’s flagship daytime programme, attracting over one million viewers daily, *Jeremy Kyle*, clearly have a particular audience segment in mind. Arguably, some of the organisations keen to be linked to the series may be surprising – at least on one level. While Learndirect²⁵ ceased its sponsorship in 2007, following a District Judge in England’s description of the show as “a human form of bear baiting”,²⁶ the Department for Work and Pensions apparently considered the utility of using the programme format to target those out of work.²⁷

The programme formats of *Jeremy Kyle* and *Tricia* are supplemented by a whole host of ‘make-over’ and ‘self-improvement’ shows, as well as other programmes which offer the wealthy a chance to express their benefactor role or philanthropism by dispensing money to good causes (*Secret Millionaire*) and the like, or to live among poor people to ‘experience what poverty is really like’ (*How the Other Half Live*).

Being nudged in the right direction?

That Learndirect’s sponsorship was withdrawn suggests that there is some degree of contestation and ambiguity around the messages that Kyle’s show carries. Together with the other poverty porn formats highlighted here, it does however illustrate the importance of media discourse in the constructing particular groups as ‘problem’, as well as contributing to tutelage for those deemed in need of such – part of a burgeoning skills/



confidence/ ‘wellbeing’ market under New Labour, evidenced by the likes of ‘parenting qualifications’. In turn, the messages that we as viewers receive are that, for the most part, working-class people lack aspiration, are lazy, waste national resources and tax-payers’ money – an especially heinous crime when there is an economic crisis and when the middle classes are doing their bit, losing out on child benefit, for instance; they do not have the character to lead a morally upright and crime-free life and lack the wherewithal to improve their condition without being ‘nudged’ in the right direction. But we are also asked to concur on who is designated ‘deserving’ or not. The BBC TV series *Saints and Scroungers* (in 2009) is one such programme centred on the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. As its web pages inform us: “Dominic Littlewood follows fraud officers as they bust the benefits thieves stealing millions of pounds every year, while charities and councils track down people who actually deserve government help”. The programme reminds us that ‘we’ law abiding taxpayers are being ‘robbed’ by the ‘scroungers’; we acquire the impression that it is easy to obtain welfare benefits (as evidenced by supposed prevalence of ‘scroungers’ – whereas in 2008/09 £12.7bn of means-tested benefits and £5bn of tax credits went unclaimed²⁸).

The cameras pay attention to the possessions of those experiencing severe poverty (on *The Scheme* for example) and through the camera’s gaze on the plasma TVs and other goods, use of alcohol and tobacco we learn that many of those in poverty are ‘flawed consumers’²⁹ and that, as these are ‘non-essentials’, the benefits which claimants receive must be ‘too much’. Once more the question of the ‘fairness of it all’ is raised, albeit implicitly or by suggestion. In the absence of understanding any further context, the viewer responds with moral indignation and disgust; the ‘binary divide’ between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is reinforced³⁰. In the context of increasing economic

and social insecurity, flawed consumption and this seemingly pathological behaviour mobilises support for a harsher and more punitive welfarism. Furthermore, these messages also work as a warning – inculcating fear that personal ‘failure’ will lead to the flawed and deviant lifestyle of ‘the poor’.

Poverty porn fits with and contributes to the political and cultural zeitgeist. In so doing it constrains creative film-makers who wish to work outside conventional ‘journalistic rules of relevancy’³¹, but, moreover, it provides fascination and nurtures revulsion among the viewing public and provides a focus for who is to be ‘blamed’ for our ‘broken society’. Poverty porn provides, or helps to provide, the justification for the ‘remaking’ of welfare along US-style ‘workfare’ models. It fits with the common-place anti-welfarism in the tabloid press. In August 2010, *The Sun*, for example, ran the headline that ‘Cam’s [Cameron’s] a £5bn Scambuster’. While it is true that some informed commentators in the broadsheet newspapers and on social media quickly pointed out the headline figure of £5bn was misleading – it includes ‘fraud *and* error’³² and that fraud in benefits and tax credits *combined* accounted for the much lower sum of £1.5bn – *The Sun* was building on ground that had already been well laid; that benefits claimants were ‘takers’, not ‘givers’, and that ‘something needs to be done’.

It is important to emphasise that there is resistance to the dominant way people experiencing poverty are represented; there are important challenges to the re-conceptualisation of ‘fairness’ we have described above, and there is support for re-distributive measures as well as critiques of the way many disadvantaged groups are demonized and criminalised. There are examples too numerous to mention of resistance to the way working-class lives and communities are constructed and portrayed in the media, as well as mobilisation against government proposals and policies and the broader ideological framework in which they reside. Acts of resistance remain too frequently met by counter-methods including messages that protesters are behaving in ways that are unreasonable and extreme, but these struggles nevertheless illustrate that ‘poverty porn’ and dominant constructions of the ‘Broken Society’ and its core messages are not totalising or all encompassing; rather, they reflect the operation of power.

Not surprisingly, a host of interrelated tensions and contradictions are thrown-up here: consumer growth and consumption is heralded as key to national economic salvation, and individual consumption as a sign of having achieved the normative consumer-worker-citizen status, a sign of success. Yet at the same time such uncontrolled urges, at least on the part of the most disadvantaged, signal personal weakness; a failure to plan for a future that might never be attained, to save for a retirement that is being pushed further and further away, to save and support a child’s education which beyond school is increasingly being put out of reach. It is also seen as corrupting of civility, of social and civic responsibility, of encouraging instant gratification rather than other forms of reward – ‘Why constantly strive to consume when we can play a part in the ‘Big Society’, as opposed to the ‘Broken Society’, gaining in other ways from doing our bit for community and society?’

Another significant contradiction is apparent here, one which is increasingly being put into stark terms: aspiration has become one of the most valorised government and policy making terms of recent times. It is seemingly innocuous – who, apart from the most disreputable among ‘the poor’ could be anything but aspirational? This is all underpinned by a neoliberal agenda that promotes individualism and individual self-help, but that which we are encouraged to aspire to is increasingly and sharply colliding with the lived realities of more and more people’s lives across the UK today – and this extends too into

the heartlands of the so-called middle classes too. The ‘normality’ of middle class lives represent an aspirational construct, a device by which to divide ‘us’ from ‘them’, to delineate those who are not like us, but an us who are increasingly also unlike the ‘us’ who are held up as a beacon for others to aspire³³.

In conclusion, the broader narratives of ‘Broken Britain’ with its underpinning allusion to family and community dysfunction is punctuated with heightened anxiety around particular episodes and cases that are accorded so much prominence in the print and broadcast media. In this manner, and in different ways, the Baby P, Edlington Boys, and the Karen Matthews cases (among many others) are regarded as emblematic of welfare failure. Poverty porn in its various formats, with its focus on individual and community failure and wholly de-contextualised from a critical understanding of the broader historical and structural processes that shape working class lives and life chances, reinforce and reproduce the logic of neo-liberal, punitive workfare policies – and, concomitantly, the multi-sectoral restructuring of social welfare policy and social work practices along market principles. The attention accorded to ‘aspirational’ deficits and what are deemed as problematic consumption patterns draws a veil over the contradictions that may be revealed on closer scrutiny. Once more we find ourselves amidst a war on the poor, not on the economic, structural causes of poverty.

Notes

- 1 A reference to William Hogarth’s 1747 engravings ‘Industry and Idleness’ to illustrate to working children the rewards of hard work and the sure disasters otherwise?
- 2 See Bev Skeggs ‘The making of class and gender through visualising moral subject formation’, *Sociology*, 39, 5, 2005 pp965-982
- 3 Pat Kane ‘It’s not about people or poverty. *The Scheme* is quite simply porn’, *The Herald* June 1st 2010; Barbara Ellen, ‘Please give generously, but not to Poverty TV’, *The Guardian*, May 23rd 2010; Martyn McLaughlin, ‘Brutal eye-opener or ‘poverty porn’? *The Scotsman*, May 28th 2010.
- 4 Ruth Lister, *Poverty*, Oxford: Policy Press 2004.
- 5 Gerry Mooney and Sarah Neal ‘ ‘Welfare worries’: mapping the directions of welfare futures in the contemporary UK’, *Research, Policy and Planning*, 27, 3, 2009/10, pp. 141-150
- 6 *The Sun*, December 1st 2010
- 7 *Left Foot Forward*, December 1 2010 – <http://www.leftfootforward.org/2010/12/ids-misleads-the-sun-on-out-of-work-benefits/>
- 8 ‘Welfare ministers rebuked over “serious deficiencies” in data use’, *The Guardian*, Friday 26 November <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/nov/26/welfare-ministers-serious-deficiencies-data>
- 9 Reagrating conceptualisations of equality: as ‘fairness’ becomes the lowest common denominator, Brian Barry has stressed equality is of not much value on its own and that we should, rather, be talking about social justice.
- 10 See Ian Ferguson and Michael Lavalette (eds) *Social Work After Baby P*, Liverpool Hope University, 2009
- 11 David Cameron, *Daily Mail*, December 8th 2008
- 12 Ian Duncan Smith ‘Why talk alone will never end the misery I saw in Glasgow East’, *Mail on Sunday*, July 13th 2008.
- 13 Gerry Mooney ‘The ‘Broken Society’ Election: Class Hatred and the Politics of Poverty and Place in Glasgow East’, *Social Policy and Society*, 8, 4, 2009: pp.437-450.
- 14 ‘Damned lies and statistics’, Media Interview, Fraser Nelson, *Sunday Herald*, July 5th 2009
- 15 John Rentoul ‘The Prime Minister’s nightmare scenario’, *The Independent*, July 13th 2008.
- 16 Melanie Reid ‘Labour’s Glasgow fortress may succumb to apathy’, *The Times*, July 8th 2008.
- 17 Melanie Reid ‘A political timebomb in Glasgow’s Guantanamo’, *The Times*, July 3rd 2008.
- 18 Ian Duncan Smith ‘Living and dying on welfare in Glasgow East’, *Daily Telegraph*, July 13th 2008.
- 19 Department for Work and Pensions (2010) ‘Universal Credit: Welfare that Works’, Cm 7957 London: Department for work and Pensions. <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/universal-credit-full-document.pdf>
- 20 Department for Work and Pensions (2010) ‘Impact of changes to Local Housing Allowance from 2011’, London: Department for Work and Pensions. [http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/housing-benefit/claims-](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/housing-benefit/claims-processing/local-housing-allowance/impact-of-changes.shtml#rc)

[processing/local-housing-allowance/impact-of-changes.shtml#rc](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-housing-allowance/impact-of-changes.shtml#rc)

- 21 Lawrence, Felicity ‘The first goal of David Cameron’s ‘nudge unit’ is to encourage healthy living’, *The Guardian*, 12th November 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/nov/12/david-cameron-nudge-unit>
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. and Roberts, B. (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- 24 Libby Brooks ‘Exotic, extreme, engrossing – tune in to channel poverty’, *The Guardian*, May 27th 2010.
- 25 Ufi, which operates the *learnirect* brand (covering a range of inter-related services for online learning, advice and guidance) also operates a commercial company and runs the *UK Online Centres* network of community internet access points.
- 26 ‘Did you see?’, *Marketing Week*, Vol30, No40, April 10 2007.
- 27 ‘Government and ITV consider joint *Jeremy Kyle* series’, *The Telegraph*, September 7 2008; Personnel Today, September 8th 2008.
- 28 ‘Britain’s unclaimed benefit billions’, *The Guardian*, Friday 10th September 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/sep/10/britains-unclaimed-benefit-billions>
Also see: http://www.cpag.org.uk/cro/wrb/wrb181/DLA_cancer.htm
- 29 Zygmunt Bauman *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2004.
- 30 See: Jock Young *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, London, Sage, 2007
- 31 Chibnall, S. (1977) *Law and Order News: An analysis of Crime Reporting in the British Press*. London: Tavistock.
- 32 A guide to what overpayments may now be defined as fraud was rewritten again in September 2010 - part of a system so complex “HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC) have begun a tax reconciliation exercise to contact around six million people to tell them that they have either under or over paid tax for 2008/2009 and/or 2009/2010.” <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/g15-2010.pdf>
- 33 See: Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, London: Sage, 2007

Real Phôné

Howard Slater

“... it seems that the only thing that counts are the words with which all people manifest that they wish to stay away from being or action.”

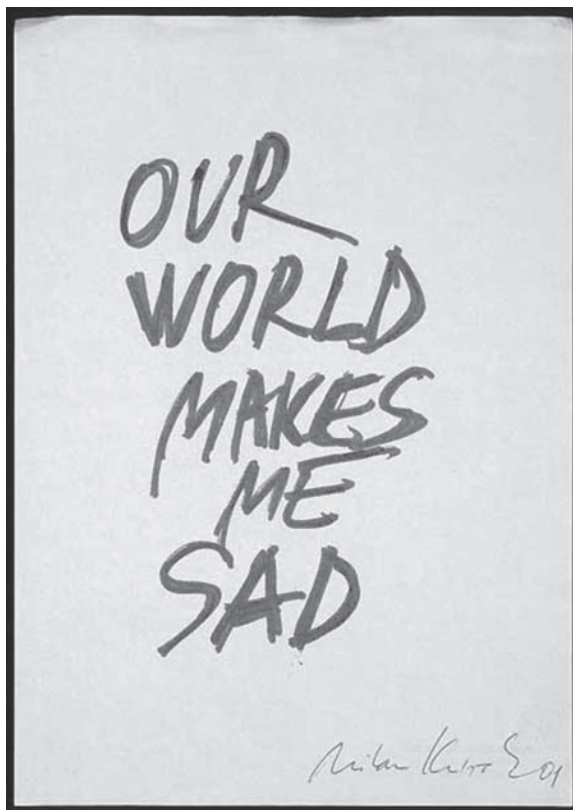
– Pierre Guyotat, *Coma*

It seems that one of the original divisions of social life, one which to some degree defines the practice of politics, could well be that which splits off the domestic and reproductive spheres of existence from that of public life. The discriminations that ensue extend to a mode of speech that is permitted into the polis and a mode that, in being akin to animal-life, is excluded. Rancière, discussing Aristotle, states: “the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the logos, which is alone able to demonstrate a community in the aesthesis of the just and unjust, in contrast to the *phôné*, appropriate only for expressing feelings of pleasure and displeasure”¹ (p.37).

In some ways Walter Benjamin’s conjectural category of the ‘affective classes’, a class which would be one that sees no regressive wrong in expressing pleasure and displeasure, is one for which *phôné* would be valued and not sought to be converted into *logos* simply in order to be admitted to the polis. If it could be said that the working class was formerly in the position of the excluded and seeking access to representation, then, the reframing of its anger and suffering into the language of politics, has to a degree made it a consensual figure. Its visibility by means of representation has made it into a “figure possessing a specific good or universality” upon which a hoped-for practice is based. Is this maybe why Rancière asserts that “*politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject*” (p.28) for the pre-existing subject, one that ‘possesses’ the *logos*, is already a representation made visible, made perceivable, by the currently operative ‘distribution of the sensible’ and as such cannot effect a new “dissensual reconfiguration of the common experience of the sensible” (p.140)? This may go some way to guessing at Rancière’s reasons for the abandonment of class struggle politics, but it does not explicitly explain what ‘supplement’, what non-existent subject, could come to take its place and effect what could take on a pro-revolutionary hue: the ‘redistribution of the sensible’.

It feels like Rancière’s notion of ‘distribution of the sensible’ is of equal importance for him as such Marxist notions as the ‘ownership of the means of production’ or the ‘redistribution of wealth’ are to a more straightforward socialist politics. It seems to figure as a radical concept that may have received its charge back when Rancière was writing about the worker-poets of utopian socialism for whom workers’ emancipation was “not about acquiring a knowledge of their condition it was about configuring a time and space that invalidated the old distribution of the sensible”². It’s as if the homogenising effects of capital, its reduction of disposable time and its guiding of the meanders of sensuality, have effected a colonisation of the sensorium, for, by means of what he calls a ‘police function’ Rancière asserts that this distribution of the sensible “*structures perceptual space in terms of places, functions, aptitudes etc, to the exclusion of any supplement*” (p.92). One could think here of Deleuze’s Control Society (“marketing is the now the instrument of social control”) or of the effects of the division of labour as they impact upon our ability to sense and feel, on the stunting of our experience in favour of the sliced-up gridlock of corporate culture. Elsewhere Rancière, more dramatically, has the distribution of the sensible as effecting a “definite configuration of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the fields of our interventions” (p.148).

Is it maybe in the interests of a self-preservation that this state of affairs is tolerated by many for



what we have with the ‘distribution of the sensible’ seems to be another more recent police function of preventative measures. The ‘distribution of the sensible’ protects us from the trauma of unmediated (cultural) experience in order to preserve desire as functional and satisfied with what is already in circulation to appease our already identified senses (taste). Could one say the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (carried out not solely by a huge media workforce but by underlying dispositifs) is concerned with blocking dissensual interventions by making them imperceivable and hence unconscionable? Erich Fromm certainly thought so when he offered that societies “develop a system, or categories which determine the form of awareness. This system works, as it were, as a socially conditioned filter”³. Is such a ‘partitioning’, then, a fair distribution according to choice or a structural ruse to avoid the ‘common’ of shared affect and the rousing of those who ‘come to partake in what they have no part in’. Aristotle: “a lack of strong affection among the ruled is necessary in the interests of obedience and absence of revolt”⁴. This line of enquiry could extend to cultural critics too. The rash of interpretations of objects and oeuvres has not only a publicity outcome but the ‘cop in your head’ function of prosthetic thought and a reducing of the indeterminacy of chance encounters.

Where then for the politics of dissensus? Rancière: “the essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part identified with the community” (p.36). But who could this supplement be and from what community? Whilst Rancière offers that this supplement could be made up of those “with no qualification to rule, which means at once everybody and anyone at all” (p.53) and whilst this seems less than meretricious, it is still unclear how this ‘non-subject’ would act to ‘redistribute the sensible’ (determine for itself the ‘form of awareness’) or how politics could escape the loop of consensus/dissensus. This is further complicated when Rancière, not picking up again the thread of *phôné* and hence the ‘domesticating’ sphere, seems to be in accord with a form of civilized consensus when he has it that politics is the “making of statements and not simply noise” (p.152); or, in *On the Shores of Politics*, when he urges individuals to “tear themselves out of the netherworld of inarticulate sounds”⁵. Taken from the point of view of Benjamin’s prospective affective class, is it not here, in what is definitively and historically excluded from politics, that the ‘non-subject’ arises? The rejection of *phôné*, of the sound of suffering, of noise and its replacement with the

functionality of (theoretic and rhetoric) language, is itself a proviso of permanent consensus and a foreclosure of the strong affect needed “for staging scenes of dissensus”.

In some areas, like music and therapy, noise is a compound of affects, it is that which is not easy to interpret, it is the sound of suffering, of phylogenetic agony, it is the breach of the real as constituted by the *logos*, it is rousing. And as such, as unmediated experience (i.e. non-narrated, non explicated), as raw nerve, it is neither denounceable, nor decidable nor demonstratable. If this unpolitical sound of suffering, this *phôné*, is difficult to listen to, if it is auto-traumatic, if crucially, it emanates from ‘those without part’, it could well effect a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ beyond that of a logos-led dissensus that Rancière asserts is a part and parcel of democracy. A redistribution that could figure the non-subjects as ‘whatever singularities’ (Giorgio Agamben), as ‘approximate people’ (René Ménéil), as the affective classes through which noise as unnameable affect requests that we attend to it with a non-prosthetic ‘living attention’. These non-subjects, then, are those for whom *phôné* can supplant the logos, for whom the convolutions of the diagnosed and the wailings of the infant are communicative. In many ways it is the domestic and reproductive sphere that has never been allotted a ‘sensible’ and in this light the ‘domestic utopia’ of Fourier was one attempt at a ‘redistribution of the sensible’. Barthes suggests that “Fourier has chosen domestics over politics” and that his penchant for neologisms “upsets the laws of language”⁶. With this there seems to be a choice that lies beyond choosing the ‘just and the unjust’, beyond ‘good and evil’, in that through the domestic comes the noise of desire and the inconsistent expression of suffering that demands that we hear it with all its lawless and inarticulate *phôné*.

These may be grand claims for a polyvalent noise, but it comes to act as a metaphor for the effects of suffering and the self-exclusion from the polis of those that suffer. Where better to find the “the interval between identities”, that Rancière suggests can found the political subject (p.56), than in those ‘non-subjects’ who in attending to the *phôné* are seeking to refind their species-being through a traumatic refusal of the partitioning effects of identity and the overdetermined forms of awareness that this entails. The worker-poets of Rancière’s Proletarian Nights are said to have “made themselves ‘other’ in a double hopeless rejection, refusing both to live like workers and to talk like the bourgeoisie”⁷. As workers they were denied access to the ‘sensible of poetry’, separated from it in a structure of work and militant politics. Being neither workers nor bourgeois puts them in the in-between of a contemporaneous ‘distribution of the sensible’ (if, in fact, such a distribution allots identities in its operation), and their leaving to found utopian communities was maybe, as with Fourier, their attempt to give their ‘redistribution of the sensible’ a public space that was not a polis for political subjects but a ‘domestic utopia’ of approximate people. But what kind of space is this that these worker-poets wanted to create? The practice of poetry, whilst seemingly attributable to the logos, may very well interject too much *phôné* to be taken as political. Is it, then, an Atopic space? When Barthes, in *A Lovers Discourse*, writes of atopia he speaks of “making language indecisive”. Is he, perhaps, here hinting at a practice of poetry? When he supplements this with “one cannot speak of the other, about the other... the other is unqualifiable”⁸ this too sets us at a great distance from the polis for it is there where the logos reigns that just these generalising and other-defining modes of speech come to qualify, quantify and speak-for the ‘supplement’ and its anonymous suffering.

Right: *Our world makes me sad*, Milan Knížák, 2001

Rancière's interest in aesthetics seems to go against what seems to me, in his 'Ten Theses on Politics', to be his pro-political aim of injecting dissensus into the polis to recharge democracy. His fight against consensus in this text seems to be about saving politics from 'annihilation' (p.44). But, if the required modes of 'dissensual subjectification' are such that they should "reveal a society in its difference to itself" (p.42) is it not that we have already taken cognisance of this point? The aesthetic discussions that Rancière engages in seems to have much more to start out from in that they allow for and seem to encourage an impact of the aesthetic on the current 'distribution of the sensible'. Art, he suggests, can undetermine our awareness, can upset identitarian equilibriums, can introduce us into the forbidden and can encourage our intervention in the 'folds of the real'. Aesthetic practice, then, for me, seems to be charged with revealing the difference in ourselves, to revealing and cultivating a sense of society in ourselves (it could consequently be just as much therapeutic as aesthetic). This troublesome and once pathologisable trait ('we are all a complex of different, miniature groups' – Deleuze), with all its infra-psychic conflicts premising any common transformatory articulation, is a further indication of the relevance of the *phôné* for any 'redistribution of the sensible'.

In his discussion of one of several scenarios for aesthetics, that of 'art becoming life', Rancière has it that for this schema the alternative to politics is "viewed as the constitution of a new collective ethos" (p.119). This view, says Rancière, goes back to Schiller who, it seems, may have had an impact upon the utopians that followed him and whom, Rancière suggests, influenced the young Marx with the synchronic notion of a 'human revolution'. Here communism is seen as the founding of a 'sensory community' that may have more applicability to Fourier's passionate combinations of the phalanx than the parties and leagues that ensued. And so, what is ushered-in by 'sensory community' is the 'affective labour' of domestic and reproductive work, a 'spieltrieb' or play drive (p.116), where the relation between non-subjects is neither solely passive nor solely active, that replaces knowing with doing, delegating with sharing, and, who knows, intertwines the partition of the sexes in an imbrication of 'being-there-for' in a shared transitional space.

So, in 'Rethinking the Link', Rancière has it that for Schiller "the only true revolution would be a revolution overthrowing the power of active understanding over 'passive' sensibility, the power a class of intelligence and activity over a class of sensitivity and wilderness"⁹. One could say that this is not only a restaging of the projected conflict between *logos* and *phôné*, but an indicator that sensitivity and wilderness are the markers of a 'dissensual subjectification', an atopic subjectification that resists its apprehension by a logos-driven normalcy. What could follow from this, then, is a displacement that helps affinities to assemble: "I divine that the true site of originality and strength is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself"¹⁰. The 'class' that Schiller speaks of, then (as well as perhaps hinting at Benjamin's 'affective classes'), is maybe premised on relational affinity: the unoriginal and thus unifying predisposition to sensual belonging which is a spark for singularities. For Fourier these singularities may well have taken the form of the perversions he encouraged into collective

expression. The 'redistribution of the sensible' that such shared perversions could occasion may very well have led to a far-reaching challenge to the 'determined forms of awareness' in that, following Lacan, perversion could well be seen as "the privileged exploration of an existential possibility of human nature"¹¹.

However, leaving aside Fourier's ideas for a 'collective prostitution' as well as the 'reciprocal polygamy' of the more risk-unaverse communes, this sensual belonging can be as straightforward and polymorphously perverse as listening-to the other. But it is a listening that is far from passive, it is an empathic and non-evaluative listening that can, in its offer of 'living attention', be sensual rather than instrumental. So, when Rancière writes that "art lives as long as it expresses a thought unclear to itself in a matter that resists it" I feel we are more or less in the realms of an attentiveness to the *phôné*. The struggle to express is itself a marker of some kind of suffering. The resisting matter could, in some instances, be the logos, the unwieldy institution that often speaks on our behalf or which overwhelms us with its 'founding' status. When Rancière goes on to add "it [art] lives inasmuch as it is something else than art" (p.123), we could well be in the realm not only of child-rearing, but also in the atopic space of the therapeutic relationship in which listening is orientated towards phases of singularity rather than carapaced 'selves'. Both these spaces are in many ways well distant from the polis and political discourse, but maybe it is here in the *phônétic* 'confusion of tongues', in the difficult disclosure of anxieties and of infra-psychic conflicts, in the 'heterogeneous sensible' of the self as a society, that there lies some chance of a redistribution of the sensible; a 'metacategorical revolt' to cite Alexander Trocchi. For in both these spaces, as in many improvisatory musical spaces, there rings out another of Rancière's hopes for critical art as an "art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects" (p.149).

This latter is maybe not something to herald as such as to discover in the discontinuities of history and it may explain Rancière's trap, as a much published cultural critic, to be compelled to speak of contemporary art. For such a 'refusal' as he envisions is already there in the radical indeterminacy of much surrealist practice; in the happenstance of contingent music, in a free improvisation willing to question idiom. But it is, one could hazard a guess, at play anywhere that there is a lack of conditionality and an openness to accept and treat as material the unconscious desires that animates and disables the potentially fluid metabolism of the 'heterogeneous sensible' of the social-psyche. This is the material (for better or for worse) through and from which group psychotherapy issues. So just

as such a practice or concern could be ascribed to the partitioning of art as a separate sphere it could just as likely be de-partitioned to become, like it was always, the propensity of 'everybody and anyone at all'. This generic capacity, a facet of species being caught in suffering in order to produce passion, could well be what is meant by 'class of sensitivity' or 'affective class', for in 'refusing to anticipate its own effects', in being beguiled by a candid expression of its own individualistic pitfalls, is it not that there is a refusal to reproduce the same confines for awareness? Does this refusal, based less on protective self-identification than on the mobility

Right: *Lying Down Ceremony*, Milan Knížák, December 1968, New Brunswick, Douglass College



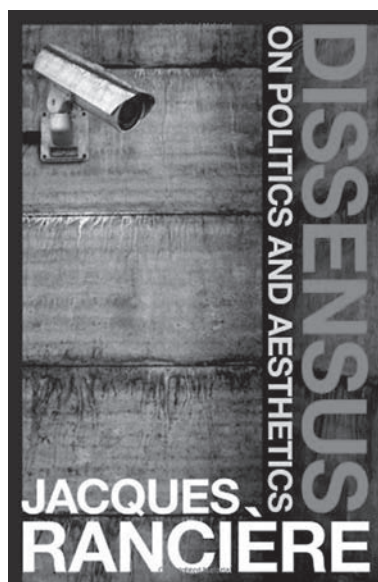
of affective states, entail an 'autotraumatic' embracing of the 'wilderness' of the psyche as a social microcosm? The traumas embedded in the past are maybe not so much indicators of personalised pathologies as potential insights into the ongoing social constructedness of each 'self' as it is pervertedly incarnated in history.

During an interview, pondering Marx's statement 'man produces man', Foucault commented: "what must be produced is not man identical to himself... we must produce something that doesn't yet exist and about which we cannot know"¹². Whether or not this 'existential possibility' could mean an evolved being to kick-start development beyond our being what Michael Balint has called 'neotenic embryos'¹³ is maybe not the point. What is maybe at play in refusing to 'anticipate effects' is an acknowledgement of both how we may well be 'neotenic embryos' and how, 'leaning-on' the offered commodity-props, we ward-off the effects of contingency. From repressed memories to social planning, from routines and timetables to keeping our fingers crossed, from the recycling of acclaimed cultural moments to a risk-averse society what we are faced with is, as Adam Phillips writes, "a history that our competence conceals"¹⁴. This history is one in which Marx and Freud collide: the necessity of an awareness of the past, to become historic beings in order to 'act out'. Rancière does make reference to works of the past as 'metamorphic elements' (p.125), but we could suggest that our own pasts, the history of relationships that have formed us (some haphazard and personal, some determining and structural), are the Grand Narratives from which to embark on a 'redistribution of the sensible'. That these may resound with *phôné* is no reason, from the perspective of the polis, to denounce them as incoherent, animalistic and self-centred. The polis encourages all of these things.

(June 2010)

Notes

- 1 Some notes on Jacques Rancière: *Dissensus, Continuum*, 2010. All page references in brackets relate to this book.
- 2 Jacques Rancière: 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Art Forum*: March 2007.
- 3 Erich Fromm cited by Adam Phillips in *On Flirtation*, Faber 1994, p.136.
- 4 *Aristotle: Politics*, Pelican 1981, p.110.
- 5 Jacques Rancière: *On the Shores Of Politics*, Verso 2007, p.5.0.
- 6 Roland Barthes: 'Fourier' in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, Vintage 1993, p.342.
- 7 Jacques Rancière: 'Introduction to Proletarian Nights' *Radical Philosophy* No.31, 1982.
- 8 Roland Barthes: *A Lovers Discourse*, Noonday 1989, p.35.
- 9 Jacques Rancière: 'Rethinking the Link' at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/monday/archives/001881.php>
- 10 Barthes, *ibid*, p.35.
- 11 Jacques Lacan: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I – Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.218.
- 12 Michael Foucault: *Power/Knowledge*, Harvester Press 1980, p.121.
- 13 Michael Balint: *Primary Love and Psycho-Analytic Technique*, Karnac - Maresfield Library, 1985, p.133. "Man (sic) can... be regarded as an animal which is retarded even in his 'mature' age at an infantile form of love."
- 14 Adam Phillips, *ibid*, p.12.



Protest in the Park

Preliminary Thoughts on the Silencing of Democratic Protest in the Neoliberal Age

Ronan Paddison

On a crisp morning in March 2009, I took part in a demonstration against a proposal to install a novel recreational facility proposed for a major historic park in Glasgow. The brainchild of a commercial company, the ‘Go Ape’ facility takes participants high into the canopy of the trees and through a variety of experiences that – *judging* from the opinions of those who had used similar facilities elsewhere in Scotland – is fun. It is an experience which does not come cheap. The issue of financial exclusion aside for now, for the protestors its installation in Pollok Park was intrusive; it was not only that screams of masochistic pleasure would permeate an otherwise peaceful area of the park, but that it would be invasive of one of the last remaining areas of forest within a park which had been progressively eroded through earlier planning developments. This, combined with the fact that Pollok Park is a major green lung which at its northern tip brings a relatively wild space within less than three miles of the city centre, meant that it was perhaps inevitable that the proposal would attract opposition.

The demonstration was fixed by its timing to coincide with the site visit to the park arranged for the councillors on the City’s Planning Committee by the Council’s planners, the purpose of which was to acquaint the decision-makers with the nature of the development and its environmental setting. The demonstrators, of which there were about 30, were uninvited – and as it turned out unwelcome hangers on. We were a motley crew: from unemployed factory worker to university professor, to mothers with pushchairs, the elderly as well as the young; some were local activists that council officials would describe pejoratively as the ‘usual suspects’, recidivist participants in local politics, while others had little history of political involvement and would consider themselves apolitical. The common denominator was that all of us were concerned with what appeared to yet another proposal that privatized public space and had, to varying degrees, been involved in earlier protests against Go Ape.

Yet, that we were only there by sufferance, as far as the councillors were concerned, became readily apparent – we had certainly not been ‘greeted’ by the councillors, acknowledged in the sense that Young¹ gives as an essential preliminary to any deliberative process of engagement. At the periodic stops in the visit at which the planner would explain what development was envisaged, the invitation to pose questions was only extended to those on the council. My own attempt to ask a question went unheeded – it was ruled ‘out of order’ – as were those of others. The sole exception to our being treated as non-persons was a single councillor from the opposition.

From the outset as the excluded it was inevitable that our presence would reflect the unequal power relations between elected representatives, their officials and ordinary citizens, reflecting in turn the tensions between representative and participatory modes of democratic engagement. Further, those who control the agenda, and by implication also control what is not on the agenda and thus the realm of non decision-making, wield considerable power.² Yet, if we were relatively powerless in being ‘outside’ the formal rule book, what is equally true is that performance itself can challenge how political agendas unfold. Our performance, even if muted by the formal procedures, could politicize the issue where the council had sought to project the proposal as common sense³, as beyond reasonable question and thus beyond debate,

merely ‘technical’.

The events that morning, together with the other meetings and demonstrations that took place to oppose the Go Ape proposal need to be understood against the wider politics of the city – the Council is effectively a ‘one party city’ led by Labour, the ruling party for all but eighteen months since 1950 – which in Glasgow, as in many other cities, have come to be dominated by the practices of entrepreneurial governance David Harvey discussed some two decades ago⁴. Following the lead of Mouffe⁵, Žižek⁶, Rancière⁷, and others, here I want to explore whether the politics of the city has in fact become a post-political and post-democratic configuration where, as geographer Erik Swyngedouw outlines, “the post-political condition is one in which consensus has been built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system” – that is, “a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars [by mobilizing] the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content.”⁸

“[C]ontrary to popular belief that these forms of neo-liberal urban governance widen participation and deepen democracy”, Swyngedouw insists “that this post-political condition in fact annuls democracy, evacuates the political proper - i.e. the nurturing of disagreement through properly constructed material and symbolic spaces for dissensual public encounter and exchange - and ultimately perverts and undermines the very foundation of a democratic polis.”⁹

Supplanting it, consensual managerial policies are “predicated upon new formal and informal institutional configurations [...] often with the explicit inclusion of parts of the state apparatus [...] a governance arrangement that consensually shapes the city according to the dreams, tastes and needs of the transnational economic, political, and cultural elites [...] that prefigure a particular form of urbanity”¹⁰, an urban order which does not permit contestation precisely because of its threat to consensus?

Was the protest against the Go Ape proposal as the performance of resistance at odds with a post-political thesis? As an historical glance over the last few decades would show, the Go Ape protest was just one of a myriad of oppositions that have bubbled up in Glasgow, just as they do in any city, to challenge how the city is to be reconstructed and the policy orthodoxy more generally. If the politics of the city *is* increasingly invested in a process of “the evacuation of the properly political (democratic) dimension from the urban”¹¹, annulling democracy for a high degree of “consensual agreement on the existing conditions and the main objectives to be achieved [...] within selectively inclusive participatory institutional or organizational settings”¹², implying a common purpose and shared values amongst participants, then why? And what strategies have been adopted to ensure that government is projected through such consensual managerial policies?

Furthermore, in adopting neoliberal policies, is a new expression of neopopulist governance emergent in this ‘Governance-beyond-the-State’? Swyngedouw notes that “[p]opulism invokes ‘THE city’ and ‘THE (undivided) people’ as a whole in a material and discursive manner”. This “[u]rban populism is also based on a politics of ‘the people know best’ (although the latter category remains often empty, unnamed), supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy, and

advocates a direct [though fictive] relationship between people and political participation”. As such, “populism cuts across the idiosyncracies of different forms of expressions of urban life, silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and papers over fundamental conflicts of interest by distilling a common threat or challenge”, customarily invoking “the spectre of annihilating apocalyptic futures” where the whole of urban life as we know it is under threat from potential catastrophes “if we refrain from acting (in a technocratic-managerial manner) now.” This “enemy is always externalised and objectified [e.g. ‘non-competitiveness’], examples of fetishized and externalized foes that require dealing with if a new urbanity is to be attained”. Importantly, populism is expressed in particular demands that remain particular and foreclose democracy, and, according to Swyngedouw, “are always addressed to the elites. Urban populism is not about [obliterating] the elites, but calling on the elites to undertake action.”¹³

How the post-political thesis has been articulated by Rancière, Žižek and others and how it has been developed by Swyngedouw is not unproblematic. Talk of the ‘new’ – a new style of politics – courts the risk of highlighting what appears novel but represents more a continuity, albeit one expressed in alternative terms. Nor does the denial of true political debate deny its emergence in the interstices, in in-between spaces that have not yet come under the entrepreneurial gaze of the (local) state or in spaces where effective resistance can be mounted. These caveats are important to bear in mind in the following discussion in which it is argued in two propositions that through the rise of urban entrepreneurialism and its populist advocacy a new style of urban governance may be emergent.

Emergent Styles of Urban Governance: Two Propositions

Proposition 1: Urban Entrepreneurialism as a Post-Political Configuration

It is two decades since David Harvey published his seminal article on the shift towards urban entrepreneurialism as the emergent orthodoxy underpinning how cities were becoming governed in an increasingly globalised and competitive world¹⁴; that in “fierce competition with other cities, city governments become curators of their own image as they coordinate aesthetic strategies in a desperate attempt to divert currents of global financial capital.”¹⁵ However, “[c]ontrary to the mainstream argument that urban leaders and elites mobilize such competitive tactics as a response to the assumed inevitability of a neo-liberal global economic order, [Swyngedouw] insist[s] that these strategies in fact construct and consciously produce the very conditions that are symbolically defined as global urbanism.”¹⁶

Hitherto, urban government had been portrayed as an essentially managerial task defined around the processes of planning and managing the city, providing infrastructural, social and cultural services essential to its maintenance, resolving problems of resource allocation, and arbitrating on issues such as planning conflicts. Globalisation and the rise of competitive urbanism was accompanied by the new orthodoxy of neoliberal governance defined by the shift from government to governance and a raft of policy initiatives aimed at reviving local economies including privatization, deregulation and liberalization. For Harvey, urban

entrepreneurialism – expressed through the reproduction across cities of enterprise zones, the advent of place marketing and the competition to hold cultural and sport spectacles, the privatization of public services, the construction of waterfront development – was “embedded in the logic of capitalist spatial development in which competition seems to operate...as an external coercive force”.¹⁷ His arguments were persuasive and, from the experience of the subsequent decades, prophetic: urban governance became disciplined into (and re-produced) an assumption that abstaining from competitive urbanism was neither an economic nor a political option.

Several decades of urban neoliberal governance have amassed a barrage of evidence demonstrating that its practice is socially divisive and that it has resulted in increasingly polarized and divided cities. This interpretation of urban change is not uncontested – the debate surrounding the changing class structure of world cities and whether this is reflected in evidence of increasing polarization, for example¹⁸, or the benefits resulting from the use of culture to ‘regenerate’ the city, for another.¹⁹ However, it is precisely because of how neoliberal practices become rolled out that their impacts harbour differential benefits which are fore-closed to particularised subjects of demand within the framework of existing relations; that is, reduced to localised appeals over resources placing the hegemony of neoliberalism beyond politics, with Žižek warning “the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance.”²⁰ Whereas a genuine politics “implies the recognition of conflict as constitutive of the social condition”: “A true political space is always a space of contestation, in the name of equality, for those who have no name or place ... the space for those who are not-All, who are uncounted and unnamed, not part of the ‘police’ (symbolic, social, state) order, where they claim their right to the polis.”

As Žižek warns, the essentially “post-political approach has achieved hegemonic currency, the only acceptable line of resistance today is that of supposedly marginalized voices to a mysterious capital power, manifested in the fight for the acceptance of such voices. As this resistance itself now becomes the hegemonic norm, the root (Real) of global capitalist antagonism is pushed into the background.”²¹

Historically, the politics of the city became played out around questions of distribution and redistribution; the dominant political cleavage came to be represented by tribal divisions between Right and Left. Thus, the election of ‘welfarist’ parties saw the initiation of redistributive policies which sought (for example) to ameliorate housing conditions for the working class. In post-World War II Britain, much more extensive programmes of social housing construction, accompanied by other social welfare reforms, became part of the Fordist deal. Local government, particularly the major city councils, became deeply implicated in the delivery of the local welfare state; it was ‘big government’ operating at the local scale in which city governments were the key institutions through which urban politics was conducted. If during its heyday the Fordist consensus was broadly subscribed to by the Right as well as Leftist parties, this did not mean that urban politics did not become split along partisan lines reflective of socio-economic class. Nor is it meant to imply that redistributive measures were not the outcome of class struggle, but that it was through City Hall that such changes were concretised.

The Fordist crises of the early 1970s were to mark the beginning of a new phase of local politics. Under the ‘postmodern turn’ – expressed as the transformation of ‘politics’ into ‘cultural politics’²², elsewhere the subsumption of post-’68 ‘artistic critique’²³ – there were seismic shifts in the nature of the (local) state accompanied by the unravelling of the state-society relationships centred around state welfarism and the

redefinition of the relationships between state, market and society. It is these shifts which for Harvey became associated with the emergence of urban entrepreneurialism as the state sought to redefine its position in relation to a new round of capitalist development. These changes were accompanied by others, the effect of which was to dramatically reshape the relationships between state and society at the local level. The shift from government to governance changed the structure of how cities were governed; if urban governments continued to be major actors the shift to governance, the development of managerial partnership working, the quangoisation²⁴ of local economic development and other innovations, meant that the governing of cities was now apportioned between a complex array of institutions, many of which lay outside the conventional play of local democracy represented by liberal democratic institutions. Other shifts were to mark out the changed world of British urban politics in the last decades of the twentieth century, in particular the ‘Third Way’ metamorphosis of dominant Left/Right party politics and voting alignments of earlier decades, and the rise of identity and issue-based politics and its crowding out of class as the prime cleavage around which (city) politics focused.

These shifts summarise some of the changes associated with the political turn initiated by the end of Fordism. Most have been the subject of considerable debate which a listing is unable to do justice. The point to be emphasized is the fundamentally different world in which emergent neoliberal governance was to be defined and operate within from its Fordist counterpart. Certain principles of government were to remain: for one, the continued centrality given to (local) representative democracy as a key means through which the governance of the city was to be conducted. In what many contemporary observers argued as a progressive assault on local democratic institutions initiated during the Thatcher years culminating in the abolition of the major metropolitan councils in England, including London, even such reforms were not able to supplant the place of urban government. Further, towards the end of the 1980s and during Thatcher’s third term, the play of class politics became performed spectacularly through the poll tax²⁵. Yet, both the reform of local government structure and of the system of local taxation were part of the wider unfolding canvas of neoliberal transformations affecting how cities were governed and the changing relationships between state, market and civil society.

It is against this background, particularly since the election of New Labour in 1997, that the post-political configuration is to be understood. Post-politics²⁶ is not meant to be understood in ‘endist’ terms, as the end of politics. Indeed, post-political theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe, would argue that politics – as the construction of the political communities in which we wish to live – is always in construction and contested. Rather, post-politics refers to the emergence of managerial consensus politics which for New Labour had its conceptual foundations in Third Way resolutions;²⁷ and as Swyngedouw argues, presents “a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars”.²⁸ That is: “The post-political ... describes a space of political operation structured by choices relating to micro-political procedures, administrative apparatuses and technocratic management. Operating wholly within the shrunken coordinates of neoliberalism, political agency is constrained to nothing more than a shadow play where decisions

can only tinker with the edges of a system whose core ideological structure remains inviolable”²⁹.

Žižek’s contention is that the struggle of multicultural identity-politics has had a depoliticizing effect, a “transformation of ‘politics’ into ‘cultural politics’”, where certain questions are simply no longer asked ... like those concerning the nature of relationships of production, whether political democracy is really the ultimate horizon, and so on ... Take a concrete example, like the multitude of studies on the exploitation of either African Americans or more usually illegal Mexican immigrants who work as harvesters here in the U.S. I appreciate such studies very much, but in most of them – to a point at least – silently, implicitly, economic exploitation is read as the result of intolerance, racism. ...the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance. The fundamental problem then becomes ‘How can we tolerate the other?’ Here, we are dealing with a



false psychologization. The problem is not that of intrapsychic tolerance...”³⁰

In the post-political what is discussed on the political agenda is pre-ordained on the basis of fundamental axioms – e.g. of power relationships, how the economy should be organised – being unquestioned and unquestionable. “In claiming to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration ... what remains is only the efficient administration of life... almost only that.”³¹ Thus, the inevitability of neoliberalism or the status of liberal democracy as the principle around which the processes of government should be organised become unquestionable in the post-political formation (Žižek proposes we instead summon the courage to reject liberal democracy as a master-signifier and a main political fetish, and seek “actual universality”); it achieves hegemonic currency³², conforming to what Bourdieu refers to as “the common-sense of the day”³³, the *doxa*, the contemporary unquestionable orthodoxy.

Lahoud: “Swyngedouw clearly marks out the topography of the post-political landscape: the entrance of a managerial logic into all aspects of life, the reduction of government to administration where decision making is seen as a question of expertise and not of political position, the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state actors, the brand management of urban space, the predominance of consensual understandings of political action, the particularization of political demands, and the termination of social agendas in planning.”³⁴

With this “evaporation of dissent” in contemporary urban governance a “neoliberal governmentality ... has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement and technocratic management” (Swyngedouw³⁵); establishing what is ‘common-sense’ inevitably requires synthesizing

agreement.

For that reason, it is the engineering of this ‘consensus’ configuration that inevitably becomes of importance, and it is at this juncture that the arguments of the two propositions here elide into one another; that it is through the employment of techniques of neo-populism that the advantages of consensualism become socially and politically cemented. At the outset, though, Swyngedouw’s account emphasizes the *style* of politics that characterizes post-politics, the hollowing out of the political dimension: “the polis, conceived in the idealized Greek sense as the site for public political encounter and democratic negotiation, the spacing of (often radical) dissent, and disagreement, and the place where political subjectivation emerges and literally takes place, seems moribund. In other words, the ‘political’ is retreating while social space is increasingly colonised by policies (or policing).”

For Žižek: “The ultimate sign of post-politics in all Western countries is the growth of a managerial approach to government; government is reconceived as a management function deprived of its proper political dimension”³⁶. “[T]hat the way the political space is structured today more and more prevents the emergence of the act. But I’m not thinking of some metaphysical event... For me, an act is simply something that changes the very horizon in which it takes place, and I claim that the present situation closes the space for such acts.”³⁷ So it is not just that political debate is becoming curtailed as to how supposed collective decisions over specific policy concerns are to be made, rather, more fundamentally, whether those concerns have a site for public political encounter at all. Thus, the premises on which decision-making is made become excluded, yet it is precisely in their encounter that democratic negotiation might be transformative. The centring of managerial politics, then, accompanies the marginalization of real politics. “The problem for [Žižek] is that in politics, again, the space for an act is closing viciously.”³⁸

At this juncture it is useful to rehearse the extent to which urban neoliberal economic governance has become orthodoxy. Most analysts are in little doubt of “the entrance of a managerial logic into all aspects of life, the reduction of government to administration where decision making is seen as a question of expertise and not of political position, the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state actors, the brand management of urban space, the predominance of consensual understandings of political action, the particularization of political demands, and the termination of social agendas in planning.”³⁹ In a thoughtful paper⁴⁰, the US urbanist Robert Beauregard outlined the rules that defined local economic development as it had developed to date (1993) in the practices of local governments and not-for-profit organisations in the United States. Predictably, the attraction of inwards investment was the prime objective repeated across the organisations as the most overt measure that the locality was at least retaining, if not enhancing, its competitive position. Of secondary importance was the question of the quality of the jobs that were created, their pay status, their likely durability, so that the consequences of what forms of investment were being attracted, its longer term trajectory, and its equity implications were effectively marginalized as being the direct concern of local economic development. Place marketing was considered a vital tool particularly in that it could be used as the means of narrativising investor success, besides which it gave markers to what were successful strategies that might be used to influence future local economic development policy.

It would be over-simplistic to suggest that what Beauregard itemised as the key tenets of local economic development policy nearly two decades ago in the United States is simply repeated in experience nearly two decades later, whether in the US or elsewhere. Mirroring an earlier argument as to how competitive urbanism is a disciplining force, it is not just that economic

revitalization has replaced earlier key policies of city governments that – at least in much of western Europe – were more closely defined around the delivery of the local welfare state, but that policy innovation to improve the city’s competitive position has gained its own premium. Successive new policy tropes have become defined around local economic development – the rise of the knowledge economy, the adoption of clusters theory, and most recently the increasing use of culture as the means by which to foster economic growth – and through emulation rapidly been incorporated as part of the ‘new conventional wisdom’⁴¹. How these policy innovations become adopted will in practice vary, not least because of the different position cities occupy in the competitive ladder. Yet, fundamentally, how these policies fare in practice remains interpreted in similar terms to the primary aim identified by Beauregard, the attraction of inwards investment, a reality which has particular veracity for those cities where (re)establishing competitive position poses particular challenges. Amongst these, the generic (if somewhat elastic) category of ‘post-industrial cities’, are prime examples.

Of Glasgow, considerable evidence can be marshalled to argue that it is not only that economic regeneration of the city has become *the* key policy objective of the political elite, but that how the policy should be pursued has become deeply impregnated by neoliberal practices⁴². For the central tenet of the post-political thesis what is critical here is that this evidence points to how policy orthodoxy exists beyond political debate. Added to this is that it is through the city council, in its capacity as the lead actor amongst the network of partnerships, that economic development policies are delivered. In fact, recent changes by the Scottish Government to the role of Scottish Enterprise, the main quango charged with an economic development role, have further enhanced the role of local government. In other words, in spite of the assumption that the shift to governance involves the downplaying of the status of (local) government partly in favour of other institutions, recent experience in Scotland suggests that the status of the local democratic institutions based on the principle of representative democracy has been strengthened. Consequently, its ability to claim legitimacy through the electoral system, combined with the powers it has to address economic regeneration of the city and the pre-eminence given to the task, gives it the capacity to crowd out the feasibility of debate on the city’s development and the means, democratic participatory practice, through which it might be expressed. Limiting the boundaries to what is – *and what is not* – the subject of debate, one means by which consensus politics becomes defined, is simultaneously antithetical to the democratic polity; it is what Rancière and others have defined as postdemocracy.⁴³

It is not pretended here that the postpolitical thesis is unproblematic. In particular, it undervalues the role of human agency and of resistance in being able to challenge consensus politics. Its claim, then, to outlaw ‘real politics’ is not borne out by empirical reality; all cities have histories of local insurgency seeking to challenge orthodoxy. Clearly, too, its explanatory power calls out for much deeper empirical scrutiny than is possible here. Yet, the value of the thesis is in its ability to provide clues as to how ‘the protest in the park’ was marginalized by the representatives of the city council as beyond the boundaries of consensus politics. Its ability to do so is dependent on the second proposition underpinning emergent neoliberal practices in the city.

Proposition 2: Urban Entrepreneurialism and its Emergent Neo-Populism

Future historians of British urban politics looking back at the period between the 1980s and the present day may express some surprise that the palpable inequalities following from several decades of neoliberal governance did not result in more opposition on the streets. The poll tax riots apart, together with the Brixton and

Liverpool riots in the 1980s and the so-called race riots in northern English towns in 2001, what is paradoxical is that street protest in Britain has become more associated with the universal (global) and distant (Iraq) problems than it has ones that are rooted in structural inequalities and the local. That in the first decade of the twentieth century Britain is a more unequal society is amply evidenced through statistics⁴⁴. Precisely by their nature, cities become the most visible site of inequalities, where in the finer graining of the post-modern city relative poverty exists in closer propinquity to relative affluence than was the case in the more segregated, coarsely-grained Victorian city, a reality that reflects the progressive gentrifying of the city.

One possible line of explanation (to the absence of street protest) is to be sought in the changing relationships between state, market and civil society marked out by neoliberal governance through the emergence of a new style of urban politics, neo-populism. The linking of populism to neoliberal governance needs careful explanation; conventionally populism and liberalism would be considered as oxymoron to one another. Thus, populism and liberalism tend to have opposite conceptions of the state (maximal vs. minimal), nationality (ethnic vs. civic), human agency (social determinism vs. free will) and other key dimensions characterising state, market and society⁴⁵. Further, where political scientists tend to preface discussion of the concept by highlighting its ‘vagueness’⁴⁶, populism is highly contested. Its most widely quoted examples – from Latin America, in particular – have arisen as political movements aimed at correcting injustices and invoking an appeal to ‘the people’ as in opposition to an ‘enemy’, the elite. Thus, populist movements aim to meet redistributive goals, one of the more obvious apparent contradictions it raises in being used alongside neoliberalism. For Weyland⁴⁷, the re-emergence of new forms of populism in Latin America – Menemism in Argentina and Fujimorism in Peru – is not accidental, nor is it contingent, but rather it has become employed as a political strategy to accommodate neoliberal governance. The argument envisages two separate but interdependent spheres in which the political (neopopulist politics) exists parallel to the economic, the neoliberal marketplace. Critically, the role of the state is to bolster not just the marketplace but also itself through a strategy which is designed to weaken democracy, in other words to constrain opposition to the neoliberal project.

Such arguments have not been uncontested including amongst analysts of Latin American politics.⁴⁸ Clearly, too, it raises questions as to why electorates disaffected by neoliberalism – lower income groups – are willing in effect to vote for it. Tellingly, this is the same question as was posed earlier in relation to British cities, the apparent acquiescence of those less advantaged by neoliberalism who are simultaneously unwilling to challenge it politically, either through the ballot box or through direct action. At this point the neo-populist argument offers explanations through showing how neo-populism is being developed as a new style of politics.

Swyngedouw⁴⁹ has outlined the methods by which populism has emerged in a new guise as an integral part of the post-political formation. Fundamentally, the state – its component institutions, including city governments – is concerned with the advancement of the neoliberal project and more specifically, for the city, of meeting the exigencies of competitive urbanism. How, then, does city government develop neo-populism as a political strategy? Key here is the role of discourse and the employment of language that seeks to persuade that its policies are the only and appropriate course of action. In this debate, the threat is globalization whose confrontation is inescapable particularly as it affects everybody. This raises the possibility of talking of the city and its population in unitary terms, invoking *the city* and *the people*, and the need for a unified response to meet the challenges of globalization.

By constructing the latter as the ‘enemy’, it lays the blame on a force that is external to the city and by implication diverts focus from the problems of marginalization, injustices or unequal power relations that define the inequalities of the city. Yet, neo-populist strategies do not just emphasise the unity of the people but are active in demonstrating that the people are part of the political process, hence the emphasis given to political participation. How, though, participation is performed – and what issues are debated – becomes constrained to the agenda needed to pursue economic objectives. What becomes critical is the language, the signifiers, through which developmental objectives become expressed; in Laclau’s⁵⁰ terms the use of empty signifiers – constructs such as the ‘European city’, the ‘healthy city’, the ‘sustainable city’, terms that are ‘empty’ in the sense of having one particular meaning but which are capable of alternative interpretation – become a powerful means of projecting visions of the city. As empty signifiers, their apparent inclusiveness – directly reflecting their ambiguity – defies the legitimacy of their being challenged.

As a political strategy it is rich in the suggestions that empirical analysis should include. Simultaneously, it raises questions as to how such a strategy might be persuasive. Limiting the discussion here to the question of participation, the starting point of this paper, it is a question of *how* participatory practices are drawn into urban government/governance.

A hallmark of New Labour’s urban policies, and one which has been universally remarked upon, has been the frequency with which ‘community’ and ‘community participation’ have been invoked as essential to the transformative process.⁵¹ The development of Area Based Initiatives, normally operating at the neighbourhood or similarly local scale, were introduced; some to address specific needs, health, crime control, education, others with a broader remit, notably the comprehensive renewal, physical and social, of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. All co-opted community participation, albeit in different ways. Cities became criss-crossed by a complex mosaic of neighbourhood governance structures in which local participation was part of a partnership arrangement linked with state agencies.

Most observers of the trend have been critical, particularly of the ways in which, while the projects emphasized partnership and collaborative working, the reality was that often local participation came up against the buffers of unequal power relations.⁵² For its critics, the concept of governmentality was resorted to for explanation why and how participation was being emphasized through policy discourse⁵³: “political forces seek to give effect to their strategies..... through utilizing and instrumentalising forces of authority other than the ‘State’ in order to govern – spatially and constitutionally – ‘at a distance’ ”(Rose, 1996, 46). For Foucault, governmentality becomes the means by which the state has been able to progressively establish social control. It becomes exercised through the technologies of power the state has at its disposal, in particular its technical expertise and the skills of the professionals employed by the (local) state. Hence in orchestrating local planning the state’s local planners are able to organize how consultation takes place and offer expert advice, both particularly for their employer, the state. Rose’s post-structuralist analysis offers the connection between discourse and the ability to create governable subjects. Here, discourse is more than language but rather it denotes a way of acting and behaving. As Barnes *et al* argue⁵⁴, this opens up the possibility of exploring how discourse becomes the means of shaping behaviour and that specifically it becomes feasible to create “categories of public that are produced for the purposes of participation”. It is an argument that resonates with the power of discourse as it is used in populist politics.⁵⁵

The Constraints on Public Participation - Returning to the Protest in the Park

At this point we can return to the story of the ‘protest in the park’ to draw out some of the implications arising from the propositions that have been outlined in order to contextualize the episode, drawing in the interplay of local political processes (in Glasgow) which also help explain why otherwise legitimate protest could be effectively marginalised. The reality of protest is that it has invariably been marginalised by the state, particularly where it runs counter to the political priorities of the state. Rather, the argument of this paper centres around how the state seeks to marginalise opposition by championing its own project and through its ability to foreclose political debate. Again, the episode and the longer conflict of which it was part is a rich and complex story in which it is not possible here to present detailed empirical evidence or tease out the nuances of the power relationships that were to unfold. Here, attention is focused on those parts of the neopopulist strategy – the use of discourse and of governmentality – that seek to be persuasive of the city’s overall developmental policy objectives and simultaneously to be able to marginalize political opposition to it.

Fundamental to understanding why the city council enthusiastically supported the Go Ape woodland adventure is that it complemented the wider discourses within which the city is envisioned. Within the prime goal of economic regeneration, Glasgow has had to confront the physical, economic and social legacy of it having been one of Britain’s, and certainly Scotland’s, major industrial centres. The story of the city’s regeneration beginning with the marketing campaign ‘Glasgow’s Miles Better’ in the early 1980s is a familiar one, as was its proactive use of its winning of the designation ‘European City of Culture’ in 1990 to bolster its image.⁵⁶ Culture, too, it was propounded, could be used as the means of diversifying the economic base.⁵⁷ From the economic nadir of the early 1980s – at which point the city’s unemployment was consistently above 10% and well above the Scottish and UK averages, and at which time the city was all but absent from the tourist map – inroads into its perceived economic position have been made. But, “although unemployment levels are relatively low (in comparison to say 25 years ago), economic activity rates remain well below the national average”⁵⁸ – by 2007 Glasgow had the highest workless households in the UK (ONS) – and questions remain as to the impact of population dispersal – a spate of demolitions has seen the total amount of social housing reduced from 81,000 to under 62,000 by 2009⁵⁹. Simultaneously, the city’s marketing agency claims that Glasgow has become a major tourist destination within the ‘city break’ consumer market. Yet, as mentioned earlier following Beauregard⁶⁰, the job creation says little about the quality of the jobs⁶¹ – the actual decline of full-time work and the growth of a part-time labour market – and in spite of the physical transformation of parts of the city – the central area and the waterfront development, in particular – the city remains characterized by high levels of social deprivation⁶². Indeed, the assertive adoption of entrepreneurialism – the shift in the marketing of the city towards emphasizing retail consumption (‘Glasgow, Scotland with Style’) – has served to further polarize its social division, which some analysis have sought to articulate in revanchist terms⁶³, others in more exclusionary language⁶⁴.

It is an irony that the practice of neoliberalism is a disciplining force, not just for labour and more widely in its social ramifications, but also it would appear for its advocates and practitioners. Competitive urbanism functions as a ratchet within which cities become locked into an increasingly competitive process of bidding for inwards investment. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the bidding to hold mega-events, including major sports and cultural events. Glasgow is a prime, but increasingly common, example whose

record in the field within urban marketing circles is widely cited in paradigmatic terms.⁶⁵ The city’s marketing agency is engaged in an ongoing process of bidding to host events, major conferences, tourist attractions of different types, in which precisely because other cities are engaged in it, questioning the premise on which it is based is not a political option. As an entrepreneurial project – such competitive bidding operates under a ratchet effect with a high degree of institutional aggregation to accumulate marks of distinction and collective symbolic capital – the process has gathered increasing momentum. This, in turn means that it is a key, and increasingly important, item on the local political agenda. Questioning the strategy is political heresy.

In the efficacious discourses surrounding urban economic development, a consistent trend has been that cities should be ‘attractive’. Whether expressed through urban imagineering⁶⁶, ‘soft assets’⁶⁷, the ‘quality of place’⁶⁸ or through design⁶⁹, the essential narrative is that cities need to be ‘attractive places’ in which to live in order to be competitive. The Go Ape facility, and the council’s support of it, is part of the wider argument of constructing the ‘attractive city’ – while affirming market precedent for common good assets. Judged by its financial benefits for the city, the leasing of the land on which it would be built, the case for support was far from obvious. (Added to this, the city was to give leasehold rights to Go Ape, a private company, for a relatively long period; 21 years.) Rather, support was publicly expressed in terms of the amenity it would offer to both citizens and visitors and the improvement to the range of facilities in the park. It was anticipated that using the facility would be expensive (c. £20 per person per day entry) and, because of its implications for social inclusion, city officials negotiated that the company offer 2,000 free ‘rides’ to school children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city. Having such a facility, the city planning committee and its key officials also energetically argued, would contribute to the quest to making Glasgow a healthier city. It was an argument that connected with another policy trope around which the city’s future is projected through official discourse (‘Glasgow as a Healthy City in which to live’), emphasis to which has been given a pronounced fillip since the city’s successful bidding for the Commonwealth Games in 2014. In other words, the facility bolstered several key aspects of the official vision of the future Glasgow; the case for its support became indisputable.

In the post-political city the future is expressed as a consensual understanding; it does so through emphasizing the value of local participation as steering policy. As in other British cities, the city administration in Glasgow has innovated with a mix of participatory techniques to tawl for local opinion including citizens’ panels, opinion poll surveys which monitor council performance and attitudes (as, for example, to the holding of the 2014 Games and the ongoing progress achieved by the city council in meeting objectives) and questionnaires targeted at specific policy fields. In 2005 the (then) Leisure and Parks Department of the city council issued a consultation paper and questionnaire on the problems users had of the city’s parks and possible methods in which they could be improved. Of the latter, an overwhelming majority (somewhat predictably) gave their support to “improving the facilities in parks”; it was this response to an otherwise ‘apple-pie’ question that was to become a key popular mandate in justification for council support to the Go Ape application – and to other proposals affecting green spaces in the city.⁷⁰ Questionnaires were also used by the city council to elicit opinion specifically to the Go Ape facility; these too showed support for the proposal. It was not that such survey data could be challenged that is of importance here (which was the case), but rather that it was being used to manufacture consensus towards the proposal.

As a plethora of studies have shown, beginning with Arnstein’s⁷¹ still quoted ladder analogy, participation, particularly where it is initiated

through state-led practices, operates at different levels from the tokenistic to scenarios in which there is a real redistribution of power through local devolution⁷² or through the realisation of deliberative forms of democratic engagement⁷³. Realisation of the empowered participatory governance Fung and Wright highlight is the exception; clearly, pre-existing centres of institutional power, urban governments, will be reluctant to devolve decision-making powers substantively. Further, to do so would be to undermine the legitimacy representative modes of democratic practice are able to claim. If politics is the negotiation of conflict, the post-political formation is defined around its antithesis, that politics is a managerial task involving the identification of consensus. Limiting participation to relatively ‘shallow’ forms of democratic engagement averts the problems of conflict. For the city council, the knowledge gained through participation could become a tool of ‘consensual persuasion’ and simultaneously to bolster the legitimacy of state action. Its actions were the antithesis of the kinds of democratic engagement envisaged by Callon *et al*⁷⁴ and in particular of the ‘hybrid forums’ through which dialogue takes place.

The protest, on the other hand, reflected dissensus; its silencing needed to draw on the technologies of power the state could engage, demonstrating its ability to regulate how participation could, or could not, be part of the democratic process. For the elected city councillor the protest was a challenge to both the mandate the electoral process had given to the ruling administration to govern and as, has been argued, to the wider visions for the city’s future development. The ability to marginalize protestors through their absent presence was possible through the technologies of power councillors could draw upon; the procedures for site visits – as in the park – were governed by regulations devised by the city council.

Many of these questions revert back to the fundamental questions that have consistently defined the politics of the city; who speaks for the city?; whose vision of the city is privileged and whose is not? As Harvey proposes: “The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.” In their new guise these questions form the core of the debates surrounding Lefebvre’s dictum, ‘The Right to the City’⁷⁵ (as contested as it may be for operating in a sphere of ‘pseudo rights’). For neoliberalism the city is a key testing ground for innovative practice; what we need to know is how the state is accommodating these shifts and its impact on democratic processes in the city.

As an emergent style of politics, as an extension of governmentality, the discussion in this article is more exploratory and suggestive than it claims to be definitive. Both the concepts of the *post-political* and *neopopulism* are contested. Further, the argument needs empiricising more fully, particularly where contingency is acknowledged as key to identifying how the practice of urban governance unfolds. As a version of populist reasoning, how is advocacy expressed through language? How are ‘the people’ defined? How are the ‘techniques of consensual persuasion’ able to manufacture assent? Is the practice of urban politics becoming increasingly intolerant of dissension? How does leadership become critical⁷⁶ and what, if any, are the parallels to charismatic leadership linked to ‘classic’ forms of populism?⁷⁷

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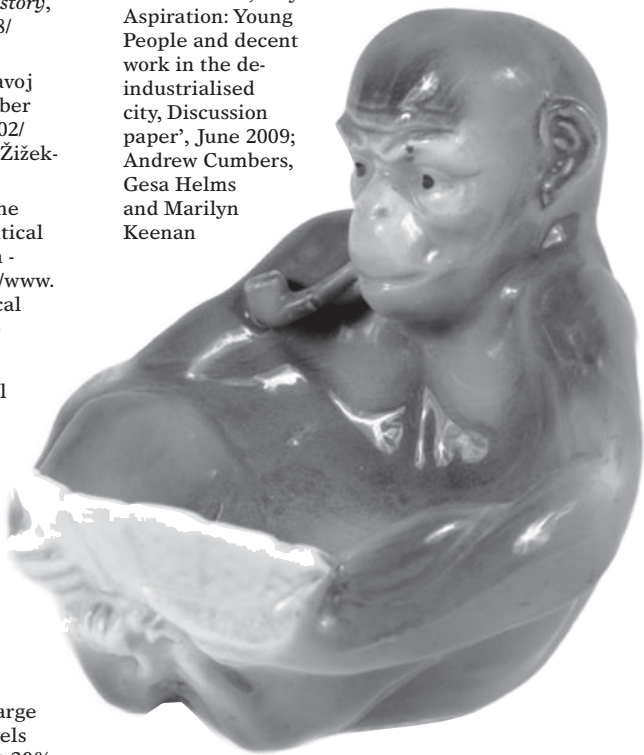
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Hierarchies of Risk

John Barker

I

“We have no future because our present is too volatile. The only possibility that remains is the management of risk. The spinning top of the scenarios of the present.”

– William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*

Risk assessment and management is a serious business these days; professionalised and a major interdisciplinary field of academic research. There’s a Society for Risk Analysis and an Institute of Risk Management. There are numerous theories and measures, such as the Arrow-Pratt Measure, Prospect Theory, Risk Sciences, Decision Theory, the academic field of Risk Communication, Risk Treatment Plans; and many varieties of Risk and Decision Analysis software. All these have a power of definition. Just as the British government elite elaborated its own distinction between ‘torture’ and ‘inhumane and degrading treatment’, so risk professionals can define what is ‘objective’ and what ‘subjective’ risk; what ‘external’ as against ‘manufactured’. Or, define it as uncertainty multiplied by the impact size of a possible future event.

Risk assessment and management’s fields of interest include: the environmental future; possible effects of new technologies; infrastructural projects; health and safety, both of work and pharmaceuticals; and the world of finance. While a degree of professional knowledge is required in all of these, this is no guarantee that either assessment or management will produce an ‘objective’ outcome. There are interests at work in shaping criteria, interpretation and implementation; predominantly these interests are of capital accumulation via profit making. There is no guarantee that an analysis is disinterested just because it is mathematical.

In recent years this process of accumulation has become more extensive and leveraged (debt-dependent), and in 2007 an internal crisis developed that showed up several of its pretensions. ‘Excessive’ risk-taking and a dependence on mathematicians was blamed, but at a systemic level there was no risk, because banks and other financial institutions were ‘too big to fail’. The notion of ‘moral hazard’ – i.e. that the institutions of finance capital should take responsibility for risk-taking losses – was sidelined, and the risk pushed downwards on to citizens and non-citizens. As for the external risk professionals, auditors, they heard no evil; saw no evil.¹ Neither did ‘risk-taking’ take long to be re-established as a virtue by capitalism’s media class. Not long after Goldman Sachs had repaid its government bail-out money a ‘blowout’ profit was reported, with the *New York Times* commenting: “Goldman has managed to do again what it has always done so well; embrace risks that its rivals feared to take and for the most part, manage those risks better than its rivals deemed possible.”

The melodramatic discourse of ‘teetering on the edge’ and ‘economic collapse’ has changed. Such an event must not happen again is one message, but there is also a shrug of the shoulders which implies a selective version of adulthood of which we’ve suddenly all become members: that’s capitalism for you; got to take the rough with the smooth. The economic and technological future is spoken of in a similar voice. It presents itself, says Melinda Cooper, research fellow with the Centre for Biomedicine and Society, as perpetual promise combined with risk, what she calls “selective fatalism”.² Ours is the only way, it says, great things are on the way, but don’t be looking for guarantees; you know the score, shit happens.

II

“Transfer of risk 68% higher than same time last year”
– ‘Ten catastrophe bonds close before hurricane season’, Reuters: June 1st 2010

Growing up in London in the 1950s, when the



In June 2010, Foxconn announced its Shenzhen factory in China (which saw wage raises in the wake of a wave of suicides) was too expensive except for iPhone manufacturing.



One of many textile and garment factories in Mae Sot, Thailand. In most cases observed, Burmese workers made up the majority of workers inside the factories, as they were cheaper than Thai labour. Photograph by Daniel Cuthbert, 2009.



The body of Praveen Vijay Bhakamwar, whose accumulated debts of Rs 40,000 (less than US\$ 900) pushed him to suicide. Photograph by Johann Rousselot, 2007.

welfare state did not just exist but was an article of faith, our neighbour was a cabinet-maker, a highly skilled woodworker. He had a contract to produce *de luxe* TV set cabinets for a well-known company which arranged a strategic bankruptcy, and he was left unpaid for months of work. It was an early view of how, in reality, rather than mathematical equations set in limited and often deceptive parameters, risk gets pushed downwards. This imposition of risk onto those with the least economic power is hardly new.

Farmers have always faced climatic risks in addition to whole cycles of pillage and crop expropriation. Empirical evidence is showing a worldwide range of regional and local extreme weather patterns that are likely to exacerbate this ‘external’ risk.³ Other, ‘directly’ man-made, risks have been created by the way small-scale farmers have been induced, or forced, into joining

the world of international ‘free’ trade; where the dice are truly fixed against their interests. The most terrible and stark consequence has been the well-documented suicides over the last decade of a large number of Indian farmers when faced with unpayable debt. The limits to the efficacy of being simply well-documented, however, is shown in the continuation of this horror year on year. There was some respite in the post loan-waiver year of 2008, but in 2009 suicide numbers rose again. Suicides are especially high amongst cash-crop farmers and, most of all, cotton farmers using a GM type of cotton seed, Bt Cotton, which originated with Monsanto and which was relatively expensive to buy. The promise was of bigger crops and less need for insecticide. But crops did not always materialise, soil was depleted, and secondary pests emerged. One estimate is 120,000 out of 200,000 suicides were committed by Bt Cotton farmers, who also faced lower prices for the cotton. Many died by drinking the very pesticide they had bought to improve their situation, but whose cost formed part of the debt; and which, in the medium term, failed to deal with secondary pests. The deaths were painful. The dead-men-to-be screaming for hours on end.⁴

Outside the specific business of GM seeds, neoliberalism rationalises the transference of risk by contemporary capitalism and also acts politically to enforce it. This was most visible in the attacks on and final demise of several commodity price agreements like that for coffee. This had given a guaranteed price to coffee farmers. Since the 1990s, however, it has been managed by the SMI (Supplier-Managed Inventory) system by which *suppliers* are responsible for maintaining stocks used by the corporate purchaser *even if the stocks are held at a port in the purchasers own country or its own storage*. SMI is a type of modern stock control process enabled by IT development in the 1980s which created Supply Chain Management. It is this, Lyne says, which means: “Risk and cost are passed down the supply chain to those most vulnerable such as developing country farmers, and women or migrant and temp workers.”⁵ And on top of this is the sheer power of purchasers: wholesale coffee is an oligopoly and a chain the size of Wal-Mart can micro-manage the market.

More recently, ‘microloans/microcredit’ seen by elites as a method of helping the poor out of poverty at no cost to themselves has, in Andhra Pradesh, become another form of risk-taking rebounding on the poor. The praise accorded to the Grameen bank in Bangladesh made it into a template. It was taken up by conventional Indian banks which financed microloan companies in southern India. The wishful thinking they promoted, risk-without-risk (and profited by), has led to women committing suicide.

In the richer world, too, there is a marked increase in the numbers of vulnerable workers, which has been well documented. Contracts are imposed whereby employer responsibility is vague while the power over conditions, time, and pay are absolute. The starkest form is the zero-hours contract. This is inherently risky for the worker. Being permanently ‘on call’ there is little opportunity to earn a living elsewhere, and if the person doing the work is told to go home after three hours, then to-and-from work transport costs mean the income is derisory. In the UK it is a double-risk for people on any kind of welfare income, especially housing benefit, if they are pushed on to work to such a contract – the time lag between such a job coming to a quick end and actually getting housing benefit restored is one of maximum anxiety. It is then, in many instances, a risk to take a job.

Angela Mitropoulos, for one, would say of this working class, and of new forms of insecure work in the richer world, that: “The regular work, or



Protests at 2007–2008 dramatic increases in world food prices. Commodity market speculation is attributed with being one contributing factor.

regular pay, or the normal working day that is regarded as typical of Fordism is an exception in the history of capitalism.”⁶ True, and none of what is happening in the richer world compares to farmer suicide or the condition of Burmese migrant workers in Malaysia, but the change described *is to the benefit of capital*, whose minders are taking great relish in telling the European working class it’s had it too easy and must ‘face up to reality’. Attacks on workers with contracts is not for, or to, the benefit of those without. The way in which additional surplus value is being extracted from the reproduction of labour-power itself is,

besides, a world-wide phenomena. This can take the form of abrupt rises in the price of basic foods, as in 2008, or, in the richer world, somewhere to live becoming more expensive. What is special about the Western working class, however, goes further than this, as Dick Bryan has described:

“In the last 20 years or so we have seen the household being treated like a small businesses, have seen labour being treated like capital...It requires households to decide whether to have a 20-year or 30-year mortgage, and at a fixed or floating rate; how to balance the car-loan with the credit card etc. These are complex financial calculations that require taking positions about an unknowable future...being working class now means engaging in competitively-driven risk calculation and management...The IMF has, perhaps surprisingly described households as the global financial system’s depositories of risk as last resort... in terms of risk analysis. Capital has devices to hedge its risks...For workers, labour power cannot be hedged.”⁷

This is the rational individual of classical economics writ large. Only s/he is an individual who must be an expert in reading the small print, and ruthless in suppressing any wishful thinking. The narrative of the ‘sub-prime’ mortgage ‘crisis’ has had no space for how high-risk lending put all the pressure on borrowers, women most of all, or how, with its deceptive mix of ‘teaser’ rates, variable interest rate, and rescheduling costs, it made this borrowing exceptionally expensive, and the cost often foreclosure and likely homelessness.

III

“The message is that there are no ‘knowns’. There are things that we know that we know. There are also known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.”

– Donald Rumsfeld, NATO HQ, 6–7th June 2002

A form of denial when faced with unambiguously ruling class representatives of capitalist states is to laugh at the way they speak. The mangled prose of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush are obvious examples. Perhaps it gives us a feeling of superiority, or that such people cannot be serious. This is a highly mistaken viewpoint, and is perhaps one that Rumsfeld was conscious of when, immediately after his ‘unknown unknowns’ – which came as a reply to a question – he said: “It sounds like a riddle. It isn’t a riddle. It is a very serious, important matter.” And, as it happened, in this instance, the corporate media also had fun at his expense. Not as a form of denial but rather to smother the significance of what he’d said. For what Rumsfeld’s ‘riddle’ did was to converge neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies of risk. On the one hand it provides a generic justification for the pre-emptive strike, while at the same time establishing risk – risk as a capability and characteristic unique to capitalism and its future – as inherent in the world, its technologies, and economy.

In the recent past the promises of the future were visibly deceptive. Describing the New York’s 1964 World Fair, Richard Barbrook talks of how, “Instruments of genocide were successfully disguised as benefactors of humanity”.⁸ The promise was of unmetered electricity from nuclear fusion⁹, a computer revolution meaning more and more free time as a corollary of less work, and space travel. The reality: nuclear weapons, militarized computing, and militarized space use. The promises made now, focused especially on biotechnology, still have a utopian element while being dependent on ever-increasing computing power. What’s different is that the ‘world is a dangerous place’ has more real traction than even in the Cold War period of strategic nuclear



In response to the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak the UK Ministry of Agriculture ordered the killing of all livestock in at-risk areas. 442,000 animals were slaughtered. 80% of culled livestock were clean.

weapons. Too much has happened since: Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, deeper and deeper sea drilling and the Gulf of Mexico disaster, and, despite climate change denial, a pragmatic knowledge that extreme weathers have become more common.

“You’ll have access to over 1000 risk engineers... “BECAUSE CHANGE HAPPENZ”

– Zurich HelpPoint advertisement 2010

This relatively new understanding that technological development involves ecological risk is muddled by a culture of selective fears. The human security literature, though it may describe the consequences of globalized neoliberalism, avoids any mention of its economic imperative; the accumulation of capital. There is no obvious machinery at work, but structural adjustment and aggressive trade policies are clearly creators of ‘failed states’, and yet they come, apparently, as a nasty surprise to the security part of the business; people like Rumsfeld. Similarly, soon after the UN predicted the end of infectious diseases in the 1980s, structural adjustment policy – *austerity* for the poorest people in the world – meant cuts in public health and clean water provision. The consequence: new infections on the rise and the return of old ones, so that by 2000 the World Health Organization was talking of the return of infectious diseases as being more dangerous than war. This reintroduced an old language of ‘contagion’, with a psychic underlay of the economic migrant as a disease-carrier, while during the technical financial crisis it functioned as melodrama, blood-and-sawdust; the ‘risk of contagion’ was a constant and added to the pressure for public money to be used. Since then there’s been the Greek contagion, while the global scare of a non-occurring swine flu pandemic gave more material to a culture of selective fears.

Dick Bryan’s conclusion from his analysis of the transference of risk to the working class is that the state can no longer guarantee the future. But the state has other things to do. Aware, underneath the flim-flam, that the casualisation of labour combined with more conditionalities on smaller welfare payments might, unlike Bryan’s working class with its financial obligations, produce a class of people with very little to lose, even in the rich world, the UK state is pre-emptively monitoring¹⁰ such people seen as presenting a risk. There is no pretence here that this might come as a nasty surprise to the ruling class. Instead, risk, like a form of original sin, is seen as a personality disorder within the individual of a certain class. This was visible not just with new Labour’s ASBOs, prevention orders, and so on, but especially so in ContactPoint, the identity register of all children in England. As Terri Dowty describes it: “What ContactPoint is really doing is keeping tabs on

children, as part of a ‘risk management approach’ to childhood and youth. It tries to spot problems early. There is a belief that future criminals have certain tell-tale signs about them...”¹¹

Simone Bull’s ‘Color by Numbers: Racism, Power and Risk in a Post-Colonial Context’¹² goes further, talking of a Western obsession with risk and criminologically evaluating the ‘danger’ posed by potential offenders. She cites what developed in New Zealand whereby models were created to marginalize Maoris and Pacific Islanders, and how ‘protection’ discourses and supposedly ‘atheoretical’ mathematics were used to divert attention from an official commitment to the premise of minority criminality. Similarly, Berkeley Law Professor Jonathan Simon has pointed to how ‘bad assumptions’ ‘risk assessment’ led to both dodgy mortgage sales and to prosecutors grossly overstating the risks to society of a large number of defendants.

For the generic, potential ‘enemy within’ there is as yet no overt ‘war’ rhetoric (the non-legal categorisation ‘domestic extremists’ being heavy with implication), but in the global world it’s all war: against AIDS, drugs, even poverty.¹³ It was in the now mocked Rumsfeld’s period as Defense Secretary that ‘environmental’ risks were taken seriously, couched in a language of both war and contagion. In 2003 the Pentagon produced a report on the potential consequences of abrupt climate change for US security, and did so while the Bush Administration was strategically vague on whether there was such a thing. In 2004 the USA approved the largest ever funding project for bio-defense research (\$5.4bn) under the name of Project BioShield. Meanwhile DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) was working on creating biological sensors that would respond to both known and *previously unknown agents* to give a warning sign of attack and to develop vaccines and antibiotics.¹⁴

These programmes were yet another boost to the US biotech industry, as Melinda Cooper describes. She goes further in her analysis, however, focusing on biotechnology as the perfect material medium for a ‘current’ of neoliberalism coming out of the Santa Fe Institute which rejects any notion of equilibrium as either possible or desirable. Cooper uses notions of economist Joseph Schumpeter’s ‘gales of destruction and innovation’ and those of chaos/complexity theory; that the unpredictable and the speculative are essential to capitalism as a model: “Neoliberalism and the biotech industry share a common ambition to overcome the ecological and economic limits to growth associated with industrial production through a *speculative reinvention of the future*.”¹⁵ It is from this that she can say contemporary modes of capital accumulation are quite comfortable with the unexpected, but in doing so makes one of those quasi-analogies that makes one wary: scientific creativity as an encounter with the unforeseen consequences of the experimental process, and the workings of speculative capital, which, she says, is its ‘reality’. This, for one, simply passes over the long-term planning made by capitalist corporations. Those attacks from capitalist ideology on Soviet five years plans as gross and laughable; what did they think, that Pepsi, Sony, Exxon and the rest don’t have their own ten year plans, adaptable to circumstances no doubt, but with a clear strategy over the long period?

The historically material connection Cooper does make is that the take-off of the US biotech industry, enabled from above by the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980,¹⁶ was further enabled by the establishment of NASDAQ, a riskier technological stock exchange which allowed pension funds and the like to make high-risk investments; to be ‘venture capitalists’ as part of the portfolio. On this basis she talks of “a tight institutional alliance between the arts of speculative risk-taking and the actual cultures of life science experimentation.” And then cites at length the prospectuses of the biotech sector star, Geron corporation, which amount to a Thesaurus of hedged promise.

IV

“The loose coalition of business firms, policymakers and experts who comment on and/or advise policies about risk in contemporary society have constructed a discourse of euphemisms as a means of disavowing their responsibilities.”¹⁷

– Peter Herries-Jones

However, when it comes to the presentation of new technologies and their possible risks – both environmental and social – the ‘known unknowns’ and the ‘unknown unknowns’ make no appearance. Inside a culture of selective fears, and selective pre-emption, people are still treated as rational individuals in the neoliberal form of consumers with choice. In this instance, consumers of what Brian Wynne and others call ‘one-way information(s)’. Despite the zero-priority given to critical thought in an ever more instrumentalised education system¹⁸, people are not stupid, and assume that information providers will frame what they provide in their own interest, yet are still positioned as consumers without agency. ‘Transparency’ is supposed to be the fix to this grit inside the pretensions of the ‘information society’, and Anthony Giddens’ ‘reflexive modernity’ as making the ‘precautionary principle’ a reality. Leaving aside the financial realities of the hierarchies of informational power however, there is an assumption amongst all providers that it is not their task “to communicate unknowns – areas of uncertainty or scientific ignorance with respect to their products or responsibilities.”¹⁹

It is not a matter of being hostile to all technological development, but when its dynamics are, by and large, determined by private property interests we are right to be wary not just about to whose benefit and to whose cost, as with GM seeds/crops, but also its irreversibility; master-race fantasies within genetics research and social control in a whole raft of identity technologies and neurosciences. What we look for, short of a social revolution against the dominance of private property interests and the dynamic of capital accumulation, is regulation of such technologies: that agency of some sort can be reached through an accumulation of individual information(s) absorption which, through the obstructive and mysterious channels of representative democracy, achieve effective results.

Regulation then, along with a new doctrine of pre-emption and an older one of insurance (with its pretensions to cost-effective pre-emptive capability) is what is offered against an ever riskier world. It is, however, less and less of an offer. Neoliberalism in its breezy voice is constantly chipping away at effective regulation, whether it be financial or health and safety at work; at damaging ‘red tape’ which is to the cost of everyone who is not you, the one in the mine or on the oil-rig. This goes along with that shrug-of-the-shoulders, treat-you-as-adults voice: ‘You know how it is, regulation is no guarantee, can’t legislate for every circumstance, or for individual error’. The International Association of Drilling Contractors (IADC) has a whole set of Health and Safety Guidelines, while the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Risk entry), describing the “expectation value of a possible negative event”, says: “It is common to use the number of killed persons as a measure of the severity of an accident.” None of this prevented the 2010 explosion of BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico in which twelve workers were killed.

‘Guidelines’ are the compromise that corporate capital imposes on regulators. In the Deepwater Horizon case key components like the blowout preventer rams and fail-safe valves had not been inspected since 2000, even though the *guidelines* called for an inspection every 3-5 years. The rig had never been in dry dock. BP and Halliburton knew that the wrong cement had been used to seal the well. What is most disturbing is the evidence that the crew and the company overlooked a negative pressure test on the well hours before the 20th April explosion. What was this; wishful thinking, or a suicidal crew? The Presidential Commission report of November 8th says that



Deepwater Horizon oil rig on fire in the Gulf of Mexico on April 21st 2010.



Deepwater Horizon burning as it sinks on April 22nd 2010.



Oil burns during a controlled fire on May 6th 2010.

warning signs were missed, but that “to date we have not found a single instance where human beings made a conscious decision to favour dollars over safety.” This misses the point: a survey before the explosion reported several worker concerns but that workers feared reprisals if they reported problems.²⁰ In a reply that kicks the stuffing out of the banality of the argument as to what is and isn’t ‘conspiracy theory’, Ed Markey, Democrat leader of the Congressional investigation into the event, commented: “When the culture of a company favours risk-taking and cutting corners above other concerns, systemic failures like this oil spill disaster result without direct decisions being made or trade-offs considered.”

V

“Worker safety cannot be sacrificed on the altar of innovation. We have inadequate standards for workers exposed to infectious materials.”

– David Michaels, director of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), USA

The limitations of regulation are that much greater within those areas of technological promise and risk which Melinda Cooper has focused on – the Life Sciences; biotechnology and bioinformatics. The promise comes from Tissue Engineering and Stem Cell Research, both of which are characterised by the possibility of the unexpected. Thus, the “construct works only if it continues to grow and respond to surrounding tissue after implementation, i.e. to transform in ways that are

not so easily predicted”. There is a danger, she says, of “excess tissue mutability”. With stem cells there is the promise of being transformed into the cell of which ever organ you wish, but as yet no guarantees seem on offer, as the disclaimers in Geron’s reports make clear. One Geron disclaimer runs: “as new technologies these products run the risk of unforeseen side effects for which Geron has no product liability.”²¹ Back in 1998, Swiss Re, the world’s second largest re-insurer, talking of the potential for accidents, demands that “we think the unthinkable and quantify the unquantifiable.”²² This need to quantify is how private capital deals with risk. Such abstract quantification is also the basis of carbon credit trading. But in this instance *where is the pre-emption?* Would Swiss Re employ its own specialist health and safety experts to examine every biotech lab? And if so, what criteria would be applied? Do such experts exist? That is, people with highly sophisticated and specialised knowledge, who would – for no doubt less money – work in the health and safety field?

Melinda Cooper does rather force the connection between a financialized world dealing in uncertain futures and the nature of biotechnology, but her take on the overly-capacious notions of Fordism and post-Fordism – despite a seemingly obligatory Deleuzian stamp of approval – is more fruitful. The production of prosthetics, organ transplants and blood transfusion is standardised and regulated (Fordist), she notes; “precise techniques and protocols for freezing, packaging and transportation.”²³ Whereas the bioreactor (post-Fordist) delivers, “Not a standardized equivalent but a whole spectrum of variable tissue forms.” She goes on to note that George W. Bush was able to avoid the split between the very different wings of his Republican Party because “there is a highly deregulated market in privately funded scientific research and services exist side by side with an often intensively prohibitive stance on the part of the Federal government.” One consequence, as the *New York Times* reported, is that “the modern biolab often has fewer Federal safety regulations than a typical blue-collar factory.”²⁴

David Michaels, cited above, said that OSHA rules governing laboratories were not written with genetic manipulation of viruses and bacteria in mind: “The OSHA standard deals with chemicals. It doesn’t deal with infectious diseases.”

Regulation in the USA seems to be taking a very long time to catch up with new realities, and in the meantime reports are of a series of deaths and comas among the 232,000 people working in such labs. The bland assurances from the ex-president of the American Biological Safety Association simply ignore the possible consequences of renewed biowarfare research; the shift to wholesale genetic changes in organisms, and the new weight of pharmaceutical capital thrown into vaccines and biological drugs made in vats of living cells.

VI

“Throughout the 1980s a new understanding of risk turned up simultaneously in the language of insurance institutions, capital markets and environmental politics. This was the concept of ‘catastrophic’ risk.”²⁵

– Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus*

The final and oldest form of dealing with risk on offer is insurance. It is an after-the-event recompense which has some claim to being pre-event by the size of its premium acting as a deterrent; the no-claims bonus, an incentive. Risk, then, is financialized, just as the system of abstract quantifications of carbon credits and offsets that came out of Kyoto has taken centre stage in climate change policy. As financialized risk management, it’s natural enough that the insurance business is an increasingly integrated part of financial capital. Just how integrated was shown by the large scale public rescue of the risk-taking US insurance giant AIG. A company so powerful that its boss, Maurice ‘the Czar’ Greenberg, had been a major force in changes imposed on East Asia in the 1990s. An industry so



US Army patrolling the streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans, September 2005, following Hurricane Katrina



Red Cross debit cards issued to Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

powerful that it has fought US health reform at great expense. The image of the business, however, is a democratic one – they’ll take your several quid so that if the holiday suitcase disappear *en route* tears will turn to smiles, even if the smiles take a lot longer to arrive than it takes to pay the premium. But they’re choosy too, and life and health insurance will become even more so with genetic testing. This is especially significant given the neoliberal push towards the individualisation not just of financial risk-taking but all kinds of insurance. Picking up from Foucault, Melinda Cooper describes the Welfare State as “the first political form to place the actuarial strategies of risk socialization at the very core of government... borrowing its juridicial forms from *life insurance*, generalizing its principles of mutual risk exchange to the whole nation.” Life insurance, and pensions as a form of insurance against the future, is not only increasingly individualised and privatised, they become more dependent on the increasingly speculative nature of mutual fund investment. Uncertainty is introduced into what is supposed to deal with it.

When it comes to environmental or technological risk, insurance can at best only be localised, making some reparation for localised damage; reparation which will for sure be contested by corporate lawyers. The reparation

can only be financialised, quantifying the unquantifiable – as Swiss Re has it – with acts of God as a contractual get-out. When the response is socialised – for example by ‘the international community’ – there is usually a large gap between what is promised and what appears on the ground after any catastrophe, as well as competition amongst different institutions, agencies and NGOs.

Dick Bryan, in describing the transference of risk to working class households in the richer world, mentions the luxury capital has of hedging its risks; laying-off the bet. The largest sums of money in the insurance business are there *to protect money*. A myriad of insurance contracts and capital market vehicles have been created as forms of ‘hedging’. As it turns out, these vehicles can take on a life of their own. In the language, a ‘hedge’ might equally well be a speculation. Credit Default Swaps (CDS), a hedge by which a bond-holder can ‘buy protection’ against the issuer of the bond defaulting, ceased to be a form of insurance and could be traded by traders with no financial interest in the bond issuer. In the months since the Deepwater Horizon disaster, CDS on BP have swung up-and-down and up-and-down²⁶ as speculative investors divine just how much the Gulf of Mexico well explosion and oil ‘leak’ was going to cost; how it would be quantified. In this dominant narrative of BP’s financial prospects and its ups-and-downs, there was no room for the death of twelve workers.

These swaps were also used to structure Collateralized Debt Obligations. Both they and CDS have taken part of the blame for the banking crisis of 2007-9, of which there has been much talk of ‘excessive’ risk taking. What was supposed to *spread* risk and make a speculative banking system safer had the opposite effect. But in the end it didn’t matter, rather, it turned out, there was in effect no risk. Those melodramas of economic ‘collapse’ were taken at face value, even when other financial instruments were not, and the banks saved by public money. Instead, the result of the ‘crisis’ is to have increased the momentum of the transference of risk on to public finances. To effect this shift, the predictions of CDS players have themselves determined the rate of interest sovereign debtors must pay. The result, riskier lives for those with the least economic power and a qualitative increase in class stratification.

What stood out in this arcane financial world was that there was a trade “in purchasing insurance against what would in effect be the failure of the modern capitalist system”. Calling this the “End-of-the-World trade”, Donald Mackenzie describes its fantastic assumptions: “No ordinary economic recession or natural disaster short of an asteroid strike could do it”. Neither hurricane or earthquake would trigger such a collapse. All one trader could imagine as a cause was “a revolutionary Marxist government in Washington.”²⁷ And yet, from a normal price of \$2-3,000 per \$10million, the cost of this fantastical hedge had risen 10-fold by November 2007. Mackenzie ascribed this to “a collapse of public fact”. There was in effect no way to assess risk, because there was no way to assess what many derivatives were worth. Public facts are almost bound to be rare when ‘the public’ are no more than individualised *consumers* of information(s), and yet by having information(s) to consume are made complicit in risk-taking decisions.

There is of course such a thing as a catastrophe insurance business. There is even a *catastrophe bond market* which, ironically, gives little weight to predictions. In the face of what is expected to be the worst US hurricane season since 2005, this market is back to normal after the global banking crisis. Reinsurers have transferred \$2.35 billion of catastrophe risk to this market where the drawing up of the bonds are conducted by the usual suspects: Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank. Such insurances, and the capital market products evolving from them, have become more significant because of environmental events, and speculation based on their future. But they are both localized and private, and on a very small scale.

What insurance and its derivatives offers are necessarily partial guarantees against the future.

We also now know that, after numerous instances of “*inappropriate mis-selling*”, ordinary persons have to be financial experts who can read the smallprint of a contract drawn up by specialists in drawing up contracts, in order not to be shafted.

VII

The realities of this way of dealing with catastrophic risk are brought to life in a witty and predictive satirical riff in James Kelman’s ‘*You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free*’. It runs in and out of 30 pages of narrative without flagging²⁸ and scorches a whole sequence of capitalist pretensions in the process. It has as its premise a near-future spate of airplane scare stories: “A common theme had to do with the insurance problem and how you would get a better deal if you accessed a bookie offering odds on yer plane’s survival ...Either way you were a winner. If ye survived the flight you lost the bet but if ye perished yer family collected the cash.” This became the ‘Survive or Perish Option’. Middle America, however, had to learn about bookies, seen as belonging to a dodgy, dangerous world, and this was helped by an outstanding ad which begins with a ‘lil ol feisty lady’ who must fly across the USA to look after her grandchildren. However: “Recent disturbances have unsettled so called ‘securities’ and on one singular difficult day the feisty old lady’s life savings are gobbled up. The very next day things return to normal and the big boys get their money back with interests. But due to the vagaries of fate the small-time players are left high and dry as usual. The lil ol feisty lady’s dough is blown. Her entire life savings just upped and disappeared into thin air. How can she take care of the granweans.” A kindly black fellow points her in the direction of a bookies and she finally arrives, bruised and battered at the destination airport to be greeted by the grandchildren. The ironies of the advertisement were dangerous however, and it was attacked by religious, political leaders, “and other spokespersons for the corporate industry who thought it reflected badly on ethical capitalism.” But its popularity continued, becoming the Perishing, and finally the Persian bet. It became too popular for corporate capital, so their PR implied that bookies necessarily meant the Mob: “Corporate interests were irritated, in particular those with large holdings in the airline and insurance industry. Nay wonder. This was supposed to be their action and had been legally legitimized by order of the democratic powers for that very purpose. Why in hell were maist of these new profits passing them by...The money men swiftly instructed their legal teams to swiftly instruct the state and federal politicos to move swiftly; procedural rulings and all kinds of legislations were quickly enacted to ensure the bulk of these profits were assigned to their rightful owners, swiftly and absolutely at once and fucking immediately.”

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Persian bet may not have seemed so ‘sick’ or outlandish. Melinda Cooper, citing Viviana A. Zelitzer, describes speculative life insurance of the time: “In a context where the difference between speculation and risk hedging was far from evident, insurance policies on the lives of the poor and elderly were considered legitimate forms of investment, while popular lotteries were regularly wagered on the chances of the shipwrecked and newly arrived immigrants.”²⁹

Cooper implies that there is a continuation from this to speculative neoliberalism, but leaves out of her account what Kelman shows: the sheer political and economic weight of ‘institutional’ finance capital demanding its monopoly rights. The rescue of the gargantuan insurer AIG by the US government, “swiftly and absolutely at once and fucking immediately”, tells as to how insurance is an integral part of finance capital, the speed in this case prompted by Goldman Sachs being a major AIG counterpart.

‘Sick’ and ‘outlandish’ wagers still exist but ‘institutional’ finance has got its sticky fingers



right in there. A recent example concerns the money that should go as a reward to IRS (US Tax authority) informants who identify tax evaders abroad. The reward has been jumped up to as much as 30% of any money recovered by the IRS. Several millions can be involved, but there may be considerable time lag before the pay out, so that “hedge funds, private equity groups and other big investors are offering an alternative... to buy a percentage of these future payments in exchange for a smaller amount upfront to the whistleblowers.”³⁰ Of course there is the usual yakety-yak, the *risk* that the IRS won’t pay out, all so that “this whole new class of assets to be monetized” will involve the *investor* taking as much as 65% of the pay-out. And feel absolutely entitled.

VIII

It may well be that those who made the progressive promises of the future in 1964 really believed them. The Cuban missile crisis had been and gone, so why not?! From the Club of Rome report in 1973 on the finiteness of natural resources, then Chernobyl and evidence of global warming, however, the notion of catastrophe entered the language. Many futurist promises made now (with the exception of nuclear energy when we are not given anything with which to judge the degree of eradication of risk achieved) are by corporations – usually in the energy sector – promising that they are either clearing up the waste and pollution of a previous era, finding ways around the exhaustion of resources, or, in real 1964-style, promising an end to disease and an increase in longevity of life.

In contrast, people in ever larger parts of the breathing-eating-and-shitting world feel constant pressure to work harder amidst fear of losing that job; see that, for example, the development of biofuels is pushing up basic food prices; and know that despite the many, many promises of genetics, the poorer you are the younger you die. What capitalism does is to create expectations and simultaneously temper them, for, whatever is developed, capitalism must reproduce scarcity. Such a world requires that we are also psychically prepared for the unknown and the unexpected on terms determined by the rich and powerful. Obviously the globalised world is complex. We don’t need Anthony Giddens, professionalized NGOs with their institutional interests, or anyone else to tell us that. In our daily lives we are constantly having to assess the odds on the basis of imperfect information.

The promises of technology are immense, our problem is that their development is not neutral but subject to the compulsion of capital to accumulate, and the psychic needs and desires of those who control capital, their ‘imaginaries’ often marketed in utopian terms. Despite all the talk of the ‘precautionary principle’, the promoters of those technologies which capital chooses to develop, treats scepticism or opposition as being due either to ‘irrational fears’, or a ‘deficit’ of public understanding. Regulation, especially in the area of worker health and safety, does matter, but requires alertness and the need to fight for it over and over. More generally we are forced to be alert, not to the projected fears of men like Rumsfeld, but to the fine print of every contract we cannot avoid being a party which can only be a collective endeavour; alert to which technological developments capital that is being invested goes, and why, and in which not, so that we can pro-actively ask: ‘Why? Why is it like this? Who benefits, and whose cost? Exactly the questions risk assessment does *not* ask.

Chernobyl victims after thyroid cancer surgery.

Notes

- 1 For various instances of this, see ‘Sticky Fingers: KPMG and the Accountancy Oilgopoly’: *Variant* Issue 36, Winter 2009
- 2 Melinda Cooper: *Life as Surplus: biotechnology and capitalism in the neoliberal era*: University of Washington, 2008
- 3 The distinction between external and manufactured risk made by Anthony Giddens in his characteristically banal ‘Runaway World’, does not hold in a period of climate change and deep sea oil drilling, just as the ‘reflexivity’ of his modernity is a highly selective reflexivity.
- 4 For a very thorough and unrhetoical report of cotton farmer suicides, see the ISIS report of 6th January 2010.
- 5 Thomas Lynes: *Making Poverty*: Zed Books, 2008
- 6 Angela Mitropoulos: *From Precariousness to Risk Management and Beyond*. ZHDK 2010
- 7 www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/07/13/marxists-capitalist-crisis-6-dicky-bryant
- 8 Richard Barbrook: *Imaginary Futures*: Pluto Press, 2008
- 9 As I write, EU research into nuclear fusion or its possibility is on the edge of being a victim of cuts in publicly funded research.
- 10 <http://www.wombles.org.uk/article2009105704.php>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/nov/23/police-target-radical-student-activists>
- 11 *Convention on Modern Liberty*: Open Democracy, 2010, p296
- 12 To be found at academic.com
- 13 It is in the ‘War on Drugs’ most of all that one can see how neoliberal capitalism and its unequal free trades have destroyed agricultures in both places where coca is grown, making it the least risky option, and in the most important, (though shifting) entrepots like Jamaica (sugar and banana economies undermined) and Mexico since the NAFTA agreement and now Senegal.
- 14 Melinda Cooper: *Life as Surplus*, pps 85-90
- 15 Ibid p11
- 16 This Act transformed US attitudes to patents and was especially favourable to biotechnology patenting.
- 17 ‘The Risk Society: Tradition, Ecological Order and Time-Space Acceleration’: www.widrc.ca/en/ev-64356-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html
- 18 “Instrumental learning might be summarised as that which occurs as an accumulation of insight, but insight within more or less assumed and fixed (explicit or implicit) ends.” Brian Wynne, Robin-Grove-White, et al. ‘Bio-to-Nano? Learning the Lessons, Interrogating the Comparison; A Working Paper by the Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy, Lancaster University and Demos’, July 2004
- 19 ‘Wising Up: The public and New Technologies’: Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster University. This group have, in various groupings with Brian Wynne and Robin Grove-White as constants, produced a whole series of critical reports on new technologies risk assessment
- 20 Ian Urbina, ‘Workers on Doomed Rig Voiced Concern About Safety’, *New York Times*, July 21st 2010
- 21 Melinda Cooper: *Life as Surplus*, p144
- 22 Ibid p81
- 23 Ibid p123
- 24 Andrew Pollack, Duff Wilson, ‘Safety Rules Can’t Keep Up With Biotech Industry’, *New York Times*, May 27th 2010
- 25 Melinda Cooper: *Life as Surplus*, p81
- 26 BP itself carried no significant insurance. Like other large capitalist corporations it set up its own – what are called ‘captive’ – insurance, in this case Jupiter Insurance, but with only a small pay-out capability, though with access to reinsurance markets they otherwise could not have. Early on there was some fuss as to whether it could claim on a policy held by Transocean from whom the rig was leased, but the contract was clear; Transocean’s insurance was only for damage to the rig. The real action has been in the CDS market for BP, Transocean and Halliburton. Speculative predictions here would have to quantify what will be contested extents of damage, and take into account the political pressure to ‘punish’ BP while not impinging on the corporate capitalist business of deep sea oil drilling.
- 27 Donald Mackenzie: ‘End-of-the-World-Trade’: *London Review of Books* Vol 30 No 9 8th May 2008
- 28 James Kelman: *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free*. Penguin, 2005, pp 94-128
- 29 Viviana A. Zelitzer: *Models and Markets*: Transaction Publishers, 1983
- 30 David Kocieniewski, ‘Whistle-Blowers Become Investment Option for Hedge Funds’ *New York Times*, May 19th 2010

In a Class all of *their* own

The incomprehensiveness of art education

John Beagles

“Over the last thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of the ‘natural order’, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible attainable.”

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Zero books, 2009)

Prologue

As is often the case, events have over taken this article. When I started writing this text, art education was in its familiar state of permanent crisis. Certainly it seemed those working in art education had become battle fatigued by the burden of increased managerialism and its attendant bureaucracy. Now, however, it seems we have accelerated into a new phase.

In recent years it’s been fashionable, with some justification, to accuse critics of resorting to crude economic determinism when discussing culture and education. However, the consequences of massively increasing tuition fees and by extension student debt, especially in the humanities, will, if they go ahead unchallenged, result in the most decisive and seismic changes to UK education since 1945. That of course is the point. Reversing and eradicating those socially progressive advances (however compromised they have been) is the ideological objective of this government, as it was of the last. In education, the core values of a comprehensive system designed to “suit the many as well as the old fitted the few”¹ have been subject to systematic dismembering. Consistently the argument has been that this system is unsustainable. The idea that this is simply how it is, is the basis of Mark Fisher’s useful notion of ‘capitalist realism’.

However, while the crony capitalism of this system may have become more naked, David Harvey argues the restoration project of neoliberalism has always been about an ideological and political endeavor to restore class power to small elites.² In 2008, Naomi Klein framed the project this way:

“...that really what we have been living is a liberation movement, indeed the most successful liberation movement of our time: the movement by capital to liberate itself from all constraints on its accumulation. For those who say this ideology’s failing, I beg to differ. I actually believe it has been enormously successful, just not on the terms that we learn about in University of Chicago textbooks. That I don’t think the project actually has been the development of the world and the elimination of poverty. I think this has been a class war waged by the rich against the poor, and I think that they won. And I think the poor are fighting back.”³

The Ship is Sinking

“I think anger is very important, and, contrary to the classical tradition, in Seneca say, I think it is the first political emotion. It is often anger that moves the subject to action. Anger is the emotion that produces motion, the mood that moves the subject.”

Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso, 2007)

In recent years there has been a steady flow of publications, magazine articles and impassioned letters decrying the current state of and gloomy future prophesied for art education. *Art Monthly* was prominent in describing this crisis, devoting

tracts of the magazine to various contributors’ thoughts on the subject. The majority of these often-impassioned defences and polemics focused on and were united by their condemnation of the impact of New Labour’s enthusiastic advancing of neoliberal ideology upon state funded ‘public’ university education – aka ‘corporate pedagogy’. As numerous voices stated, the accession of this cast-as-technocratic market rationalism (managerialism) is creating a dysfunctional relationship between student and tutor, one which is more akin to that of consumer/ customer and ‘knowledge provider’.⁴ This reciprocal commercial relationship is further muddled, because, as Fisher has written, it’s never too clear if the students are the consumers or the actual products being produced.⁵

While the magazine pages and websites of art publications (even *Frieze* ran with a similar ‘debate’) were consumed with a largely negative perception of art schools’ future, other critical voices in the ‘sector’ were less vociferous in tone, keener to stay away from too much overt discussion of the politics of policy – involvement in structural issues often came across as being beneath many. However, this work was similarly underpinned by a shared sense of emergency. In books such as ‘Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)’ and ‘A.C.A.D.E.M.Y’, contributors proposed how art schools could and should respond to the shifting position of art and culture in a world dominated by Fisher’s pervasive business ontology. The talk was of alternatives to existing models. In articles by educators such as Yve Lomax, Simon O’Sullivan, and Irit Rogoff, the focus was less on responding to economic and policy assaults and more on trying to identify the possibilities and potentialities of developing radically new forms of and locations for art education. Against the instrumentalism and resultant specialisation of market driven aesthetics, they proposed alternative practices that develop ‘embedded criticality’, ‘non teleological epistemologies’, and ‘problem based learning’.⁶ The danger of this approach lies in what futurology skillfully avoids, namely any assessment of *where* we are and *how* to get somewhere else. Rather, it tends to simply ‘wish’ us out of ‘crisis’ while acquiescing to the imperatives of ‘now’, as witnessed by the sudden Big Society-oriented academic research interest in ‘co-operatives’.

The pervasive sense of crisis that saturated these different responses continues to be hard to dispute. While it’s difficult to countenance the rather self-serving mythologising of a Halcyon period of “free and open zones of experimentation”⁷ which often underpins defences of art school values (and perhaps secures its conservatism), this doesn’t invalidate the anger prompted by the application to education of neo-liberal ideology and its beliefs in market liberalism and managerialism.

However, while signs of the pathogens infecting the system were hard to ignore, there was a problem in the focus on the reasons for the breakdown. Reading the varied discussions, the defences and alternatives felt hampered in their potential by a blind spot. The majority of these exchanges paid insufficient attention to the ongoing, but now it seems exponentially increasing, problem of class exclusion within art schools and the resultant rise of a homogeneous student body. This is an old story but it’s clearly getting worse and will continue to do so – not least due to tuition fee increases⁸ and ‘globalisation’ representing the imposition of this neoliberal ideology on a transnational scale. The consequences of this are dire, and not

just for art schools. The one solution I can see – as a practicing artist and tutor – is a renewed, reimagined, core insertion of comprehensive education values as absolutely essential. To be clear, this isn’t just about economics, or questions of diversity, or core values of universal access based on fairness and equality. As fundamental as these are, the assertion here is that a diverse, comprehensive mix of students is absolutely intrinsic to art school culture, pedagogy and by extension the creation of wider culture that it informs.

Art for a few

“The one ‘selecting’ institution that readily agreed to participate did so at the insistence of a senior manager who was concerned that their admissions tutors were ‘trying to make everyone middle class.’”

‘Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network⁹

NALN’s recent report, ‘Art for a Few’, reaffirmed that for art school education issues pertaining to the lack of social diversity are still central; identifying problems relating to continuing overt and covert exclusion (non selection) of students from ‘outside’ the dominant middle class strata. As the report remarks, “the art academy has a deeply embedded, institutionalized class and ethnically biased notion of a highly idealized student against whom they measure students”.¹⁰ While there are many programmes run by national art schools aimed directly at widening the intake of students from outside the ‘natural’ or ‘usual’ selection pools (the report highlights how some tutors refer disparagingly to students as WPs, aka Widening Participation Students¹¹), profound problems still persist.

The report’s figures (based on those provided by UCAS) state that those students classified as coming from the lower socio-economic classes (referred to as SEC 4-7’s; which range from those in routine occupations to small employers¹²) in Fine Art represent 24-33% of the whole student population (these figures refer to the period between 2004/5 - 2007/8, and compares to 32-32.4% for all HE students in the UK coming from households classified as SEC 4-7¹³). As this is a mean average, this figure needs to be digested with some skepticism. Fluctuations between geographical areas and schools suggest a far more pronounced spiking of those statistics at some schools. For instance, some controversy surrounded this question of class composition in relation to Glasgow School of Art – in 2002 a *Guardian* article ran with the headline ‘Glasgow “posher” than Oxbridge’¹⁴, while a *wikipedia* entry in 2008, stating that its class diversity was the third worst in the UK after Oxford and Cambridge, provoked a principled defence of the school’s record on inclusion. While the figures that prompted these articles on the alleged elitism (which related to a 2002 report) were flatly disputed, with some justification, they do point to possible fluctuations within the figure of 24-33% inclusion. For instance, the mean average figures are undoubtedly upwardly skewed by the much higher than average composition of SEC 4-7 category students (working class students) at schools such as Wolverhampton and Sheffield.

The Good Student and the Consensual Idyll

‘Art for a Few’ evidenced how the sample art schools’ admissions procedures were formally and informally prejudiced against students from outside the usual spheres of selection (the

WP student). As the report noted: “Normalised student identity is subtly held in place whilst the WP student is constituted as ‘Other’, deserving of higher education access but only to ‘other’ kinds of discourse and institutions.”¹⁵

The kind of exclusion operating within art school culture at the point of entry into the system then revolves around naturalised assumptions about the right type of student. Notions of good communication skills are, as the report makes clear, “judged from a white, middle class perspective”¹⁶, which result in judgments [...] being enacted, which are claimed to be ‘fair’ and ‘transparent’ and even ‘value free’ but [are] clearly (from the long list of quite specific and value loaded sets of expectations) [...] embedded in histories of classed and racialised inequalities/ misrecognitions and complex power relations”.¹⁷ The report goes on to question the increasing emphasis on academic qualifications as another way in which students from the SEC 4-7 category are prejudiced against. High quality academic qualifications are identified as being a further privilege many will have been denied – “class-biased ideas of effective signs of intelligence – which seem natural and innate are partial and class centrist.”¹⁸

Once they are in...

What the report makes clear is how art schools at the point of selection continue to play an active if largely occluded role in what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed ‘cultural reproduction’. Bourdieu’s analysis is fairly explicit in setting out how education plays an active role in perpetuating class-based inequalities between generations (i.e. people from the same backgrounds become artists). For Bourdieu, a key factor is that this cultural reproduction frequently occurs despite the best efforts of those involved in education – exclusion operates often as a result of hidden assumptions on the part of educators.

The mechanisms of cultural reproduction don’t just begin and end at the point of selection. The perhaps thornier question is what kind of experiences those “lucky enough to get in” to art school from outside the usual territories have once they’ve crossed the threshold?

If, as ‘Art for a Few’ reports, there are in many art schools implicit class-centrist assumptions regarding what kind of applicants will make the best future art students, it’s logical that these assumptions (biases) continue to operate with regard to the kind of teaching that occurs within those very same institutions and the kind of education experiences students from the SEC 4-7 groups can expect to experience. The nature of these experiences may well be more difficult to ascertain or ‘prove’, but if the model of the ‘good student’ is a pervasive model, it does seem reasonable to assume that those same internalised categories for grading and assessing students at the point of entry continue to operate internally within the pedagogic culture of the schools.

It’s a shame that the NALN report didn’t explore this further. Issues over inclusion at the point of entry for those figured as ‘other’ are perhaps well known. But questions regarding these students’ experiences once in art school are more problematic. For instance, researching the social background of students who drop out of art school would be significant. This kind of research might highlight how even in schools where SEC 4-7 inclusion appears high, problems of self-exclusion and the equally problematic one of ghettoisation are high, both as a result of implicit and explicit pedagogic practices. As Bourdieu’s analysis shows, the most effective means of cultural reproduction is the generation of the feeling (‘habitus’) that ‘that’s not for me’. The worry is the distinct possibility a two tier culture, with clusters/pockets/ groups of distinct students, operates within art schools, something which isn’t being flagged up by statistics of inclusion and diversity.



Too Obvious

Within any discussion of exclusion and the need for embedding of comprehensive values within art school culture lies, as detailed in the NALN report, the thorny question of class division, hierarchies and exclusion. The problem of focusing on this issue of class and exclusion within art education is ‘difficult’. Not least because talking about class more broadly is in itself a deeply troubling thing for many to do. Firstly because, as David Harvey has written about at length, there is a pervasive, ideological issue today in discussing class at all. As he notes:

“Progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to Neoliberal thinking since it is one of the primary fictions of Neoliberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists...The first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is. The mass of the population has either to resign itself to the historical and geographical trajectory defined by overwhelming and ever increasing upper class power, or respond to it in class terms.”¹⁹

Elsewhere, Harvey goes on to discuss this ideological sleight of hand in greater detail. The idea of a classless society or the notion that class distinctions are no longer applicable is itself an ideological construct. Few would dispute, and Harvey doesn’t himself, that traditional, simplistic divisions of society into working, middle and upper class are no longer appropriate – for one they fail to take into account the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality – but to extrapolate and state as many do that class issues have disappeared is at best delusional and at worst ideologically self serving. The statistics Harvey uses to show how much richer the rich have got during the last thirty years are stark.²⁰

While Harvey and others identify this naturalising of class inequality and class power as the central, pivotal achievement of the neoliberal project during the last forty years, there has been a far longer silence in the art world as regards class, and it remains the elephant in the room. Rarely does it make any kind of substantive appearance. Although the collaborative group Bank made numerous, highly entertaining excursions into this territory in the mid 1990s, it has generally remained the guilty liberal secret that has propelled many well intentioned participatory practices and socially inclusive public art works. Unfortunately, this ‘traditional’ often embarrassed, guilt-ridden silence that dominates within the art sector needs now, as a matter of urgency, to be broken within the spaces of education.

To be Comprehensively rewritten (out of history)

Predictably, following Milton Friedman’s and the Chicago boys’ credo, it is every day clearer that ‘crisis opportunities’ are being manipulated and

the UK’s current Conservative/ Liberal coalition government is implementing Klein’s ‘shock doctrine’. Within the sphere of state education, as many Tories have been gleefully pleased to announce, the opportunities for Conservatives to further privatise are the ones set up for them by the previous Labour government. Education secretary Michael Gove’s²¹ recently announced plans for schools in England to opt out of Local Authority control point to this – thus green lighting the perennial Tory dream of finally demolishing the state supported comprehensive system. After years of ‘softening up’ by both Tories and New Labour, the comprehensive system, like the health service, is sufficiently on its knees that the ‘sound logic’ of the necessity of applying ‘business ontology’ to education seems likely to be passed without significant parliamentary opposition – who, after all, is there to oppose it?

It is clear to most that this legislation, coupled with what is already known as the postcode lottery²², will result in the effective privatisation of the state education system. With a certain historical irony, a moment of crisis is being used to implement legislation that will reverse a previous moment of crisis legislation – which was after all what the Keynesian welfare state emerged from. The consequences will effectively plunge us back to a pre-welfare state, an explicit hierarchal division of education. For an ideology that finds abhorrent the very notion of anything public and outwith (seemingly) the logic of profit, the situation looks perilous. Writing from the context of US education, Henry A Giroux’s analysis is prescient:

“Public schools are under attack not because they are failing or are inefficient, but because they are public, an unwanted reminder of a public sphere and set of institutions whose purpose is to serve the common good and promote democratic ends.”²³

We are then faced with a pivotal moment, one where the very idea of public subsidised free universal comprehensive education is in danger of being erased from the imagination as a popular viable ideal. The Conservative assault is hardly surprising, but is exasperated by the manner in which prognosis of its ‘natural death’, its ‘flawed logic’ as a system, has been internalised and accepted widely across society – the ‘natural impossibility’ of a comprehensive system owes its success to a similar ideological sleight of hand deployed when (not) discussing class.

Faced with this moment, it is clear to me that issues about exclusion need to be equally embedded alongside all curricula and pedagogic innovation. It is no longer forgivable or strategically appropriate to regard them as appendices to be dealt with by external WP programmes. Tackling exclusion and transforming the culture of art schools are two inextricable sides of the same coin.

Focusing on issues about student satisfaction, or criteria of the latest evaluation regime of Higher Education, resources, or alternatively suggesting the creation of independent small scale artist-run

art schools, still means that the wrong questions about, and causes for, the current state of art education are being proposed. At present, either the defences of art education are too reactive, and willing to replicate and reinforce the neoliberal agenda, for instance the focus on student dissatisfaction reinforces the paradigm of student consumer and teacher provider; or, as with much of the discussion around new art schools becoming unshackled from the state, are undermined by a complete failure to identify how they would address this core issue of exclusion and diversity – small scale, privately funded independents would probably face greater challenges than pre-existing schools in terms of diversity.

The second aspect is the inability to imaginatively and publicly state the need for the centrality of comprehensive values as core to any reimagined notion of art school – as being both an ethical, and, more practically, a structural necessity for the informing of artists and art – should also be best understood as part of the bigger problem now facing those who used to, once upon a time, refer to themselves as being of the Left. The problem is the familiar inability²⁴ to popularise a seductive, imaginative alternative to the bankrupt values of our consumerist-capitalist-entertainment-network, which permeates the art education sector too. Just as the Left has largely failed in popularising a set of alternative values²⁵ (Simon Critchley regards this as fundamentally a problem of naming²⁶), within art education there has been a similar failure of the imagination to express comprehensive values as core. The sort of ideological debates that could distinguish between liberalism and democracy. Consequently, there’s been no ‘big idea’ to get behind – e.g. key values such as the principle of autonomy as the means to defend culture from government, and the public interest which that principle is meant to protect – just an increasingly confused, often tribal, partisan defence of something frequently vague, intangible and contradictory. This is a particular problem for art education, as it has always been hampered by its epistemological instability, something that since the breakdown of rigid Modernist certainties has increased. While this loss of particular forms of authoritarian power and control is a good thing, it has created a pedagogic vacuum within art education since filled by neoliberal dogma. The loss of an emancipatory project or dimension to education – body snatched by an ‘entrepreneurialism’ of the self – finds echoes in other areas. For example, both Nancy Fraser and Nina Power have recently written about the depressing consequences for Feminism of a similar decoupling of its radical politics, or as Fraser puts it, Feminism’s ‘emancipatory edge’²⁷ from its everyday practice, as a result of neoliberalism’s *granting* of its demands. As Power pithily remarks; “stripped of any internationalist and political quality, feminism becomes about as radical as a diamante phone cover”.²⁸ The fundamental differences here centre on the sort of democratic society one believes in: a technocratic and managerial one, mainly geared towards supporting freedoms of expression hedged within consumerism, or one geared towards freedoms and equalities in public discourse as a whole.

‘Interesting things happen in art schools because of an interesting mix of students’

While a publicly stated commitment to the ideals of comprehensive education, to directly confront issues related to class exclusion as being vital to the production of artistic culture, may be read as archaic, an example of one of Žižek’s “lost causes”, it’s telling how frequently in a sublimated form the ‘ideals’ of comprehensive education haunt contemporary discussions about art school and the future of art education.

In Steven Madoff’s ‘Art School Propositions for the 21st century’ there is, for example, a text

by Boris Groys entitled ‘Education by infection’. Groys examines the challenges faced by educators teaching in a post post-modernist “free for all”²⁹ culture, where no one tradition dominates. In this new pedagogic space, he writes, “just as art after Duchamp can be anything, so art education can be anything”. Groys’ “solution” for how art education can be reinvigorated uses an idea coined by Malevich, namely the “trope of biological evolution”. Adopting Malevich’s work, Groys discusses how artists (and art students within the confines of an art school) need to “modify their immune systems of their art in order to incorporate new aesthetic bacilli”.³⁰ For Groys, this means artists/ students/ educators opening themselves up to distinctly different forms of work, experiences, subjectivities and identities. Groys states that this was an essential aspect of progressive modernism that needs to be reaffirmed and grasped: “radical modern art proposed that artists get themselves infected with exteriority [and] become sick through the contagions of the outside world, and become an outsider to oneself”.³¹ (There is not scope here to also critique the pathologising of communion in Groys’ motif.)

For Groys, this is essential for the production of art that avoids the kind of stagnation and stasis favoured by “sincere artists”. Sincere artists, in Groys’ analysis, are dull and powerless, because by being sincere they follow a repetitious programme that only reproduces “their own existing taste” and only “deals with their own existing identity”. In contrast, Groys argues that the production of creative, “insincere artists” (in creative industry newspeak – to try to recoup it from market avidity – those who favour ‘risk and experimentation’) is fundamentally predicated on openness. This is, for Groys, the essential characteristic feature of art schools’ “modernist inheritance”. An inheritance that favours the revelation of “the other within oneself”, and asks the student to become ‘other’ – to “become infected by Otherness”.

In another context, Iain Biggs in his article ‘Art Education and the Radical imagination’ makes similar claims to Groys’ for the need to assert the importance of inter-relatedness (‘cross pollution of students’) within education. Biggs talks about the need to embrace the “reanimating of alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories” which are distinct to those validated by the new establishment. That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethical mode of being in art school (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist model) can we resurrect a more transformative role for art. Biggs argues that only by changing pedagogical practices can this be done. For him this is about ditching what Paulo Freire critically called the “banking concept of education” – “where knowledge is seen as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those whom they consider to know nothing” – to one which is far less hierarchal and is centered on problem posing and a relationship where students and tutors develop, simultaneously, powers of “critical solicitude”. For Biggs this is representative of “good educational practice”, the kind of pedagogic practice that ensures that teaching is based on: “A real concern for the students’ self understanding, because genuine self understanding is always an understanding of our interrelatedness to others, and so finally to questions about the common good in a just society.”

For Biggs, the shift away from the competitive, career orientated individualism, dominant in much academia including art education, towards what he calls an “ethical imagination” – a capacity for imaginative empathy – is “fundamental to any just society”; “it makes possible our ability to allow the ‘other’ its own existence – not for my sake, nor because it conforms to my scheme of things, but for its own sake”.

The fact is that experience of the other is now frequently pedagogically manufactured as a segregated curriculum activity – students or



artists sent out on field trips to carry out *research* into what ‘non art people’ are like. And this is the problem – the extent to which multiculturalism in practice fails to involve interculturalism. If ‘contact’ with the ‘alien’ or ‘other’ is only ever temporary and structurally prescribed, the kind of interrelatedness, ‘infection’ and ‘ethical imagination’ argued for will at best only ever be transitory. Where art education has, all too briefly, ‘worked’³², the mutual interrelatedness that Groys talks about as being essential for the infection of the artist with foreign bacilli is embedded within education ecology, not as a bolted on arranged trip to ‘foreign lands’ or manufactured introductions to ‘exotic others’. In an education system that is comprehensive, these experiences of being challenged and opened up to foreign subjectivities and identities that contradict who or what you are, and which are frequently antagonistic to our position, is structurally integrated into the fabric of the pedagogy. This bringing together of distinct identities produces the opposite to an “idyll of consensus”³³ (a homogenized space of agreement) which is, as the statistics indicate, becoming increasingly common within schools purified of ‘infections’ and ‘others’.

Missed critiques of multiculturalism

New Labour posited multiculturalism’s ‘cultural diversity’ as an innocuous competition of peers, rather than an unequal struggle, writing over inscriptions of inequality and conflict. However, behind the egalitarian rhetoric, issues of inclusion and control were obscured by talking as if all cultures were distinct and equal. A central issue in the politics of multiculturalism has been its ability to simultaneously recognise and disavow difference – political turmoil has instead been defined as the result of failed communication. Under new Labour, institutions were increasingly called upon to demonstrate their multicultural credentials – who benefitted from the use of multiculturalism as a signifier of institutional value when institutional statements of multicultural purpose have not evidently resulted in tangible changes in staffing or pedagogic practice?

Pragna Patel:
“Sure. And what’s happened in education in the last decade is just a kind of liberal multiculturalism. There’s been no actual antiracism, just ‘recognising diversity’ – different religious festivals – a lesson on how not to tackle racism in schools. One main finding was that the kind of antiracism schools espoused was dogmatic and moralistic which was divisive and guilt-inducing, quite dangerous. One thing I find frustrating is that the media are discussing these issues in such a compartmentalised

way. There’s no attempt to link economics or social deprivation with racism, for instance.... But this is not my idea of a civil rights movement. If race is the only focus there’s a danger of returning to a hierarchy of oppressions, whereas my experience is that one has to deal with things simultaneously.”³⁴

As Homi Bhabha states:
“To question the deployment of ‘difference’ as a counter to the negatively perceived ‘totalisation’, is not to deny the fecundity of a notion which insists on subjectivity as polymorphous, community as heterogeneous, social formations as mutable and culture as vagrant. It is to recognise that ‘difference’ has been diverted by a postmodernist criticism as a theoretical ruse to establish a neutral, ideology-free zone from which the social dissension and political contest inscribed in the antagonist pairing of coloniser/colonised, have been expelled. A policy statement defining difference in terms of bland variations on a placid continuum, unhinged from the planned inequalities of actually existing social regimes and political struggles...”³⁵

The consequence of this consensus – where social dissension and political contest have been expelled – appears to conform to a broader technologically produced narcissism; as Robert Hassan writes of the negative aspect of new technologies:

“Through the technological ability to be exposed only to what you want to be exposed to, opinions, views and ideas ring as if in an echo chamber. As Sunstein puts it: ‘New technologies, emphatically including the internet, are dramatically increasing people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others’. More than ever there is the tendency to listen out only for ‘louder echoes of their own voices’. This presents a major problem as far as a vibrant and diverse democratic functioning is concerned.”³⁶

A homogenised student body produces its own form of this broader technologically manufactured narcissism – ‘I only engage with ideas that reinforce my pre-existing values’. It also increasingly appears to replicate the production of consensual islands or ghettos produced by broader social engineering (or apartheid) dominant in our cities and towns (‘Where are Britain’s working classes?’³⁷). These characteristics should be anathema to art school culture. The consequences of encountering distinct subjectivities, namely forms of dissensus and antagonism, should exist between students, and occasionally between student and tutor (something which the wholesale adoption of a consumerist ethic absolutely negates against). Indeed, butting up against a dominant culture, imbued with an untroubled sense of its own unquestionable value was (and remains) a depressing experience for those not ‘blessed’ with an inalienable sense of being at home within ‘real’ culture.³⁸ However, the often antagonistic debates created between these ‘others’, those whose subjectivity is often motivated by being bored and out of place, and those at home within culture, frequently leads to a questioning of dominant modes of thought. In the case of art, it has led to fundamental questions regarding the ontology of art – those radical destabilizing acts that, like Conceptualism, produce the sickness Groys argues for. This is mainly because students from outside the strata of ‘normal art students’ are frequently, because of their backgrounds, more troubled by the divisions in the broader culture that allow for arts’ ‘freedom’.³⁹

I’m not adhering here to a grassroots fantasy of art schools or some pseudo bullshit version of Cameron’s ‘Big Society’. I don’t have unbridled faith in the power of students to exclusively develop innovative art, autonomously. Conversely, however, at the moment there’s a compensatory overemphasis and faith in pedagogic innovation as the primary, at times it seems exclusive, means of generating energy within the art education system. Re-examining radical pedagogic practices from the 1960s is timely, but the power, control and authority, however much it is self-questioning, still lies with tutors. It’s an imposition of change from above, however well meaning. The folly on the part of city managers as to believing they can engineer



the evolution of culture in our cities has been proven to be oxymoronic to ‘real’ culture. There’s a similar danger within the art education system of believing pedagogic and technological innovations are ‘engines of change’. Not least, because the notion that art schools and art tutors can envisage the art of the future is as, it always has been, something that should be resisted or dismissed outright.

Playing God, Social Darwinism

“This government knows that culture and creativity matter. They matter because they can enrich all our lives, and everyone deserves the opportunity to develop their own creative talents and to benefit from others. They matter because our rich and diverse culture helps bring us together. They also matter because creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future.”

Tony Blair⁴⁰

There is another, grimly amusing aspect in which the application of a business ontology rebounds when judged against its own rhetoric; the consequences of neoliberal education restructuring directly contradict the stated aims of its education policy – producing dynamic, original thinkers for the knowledge economy. In this, the actuality of neoliberal practice, as opposed to its ideological rhetoric, is revealed. Its economic aggressive brand of Social Darwinism produces exactly the kind of conditions the neoliberal project was purported to rid society of, namely the stasis and stagnation of flattened, state controlled culture.

Harvey elucidates how neoliberal ideology and its beliefs in markets and managerialism are riddled with these kinds of transparent flaws and apparent contradictions. Some are nakedly self-serving, such as a deregulated private banking system that can’t be allowed to fail and must be shored up by increasing public debt. What might be presented as flaws in the system, for example

Book Bloc and their books at demonstrations in Rome, November 2010.

those which allow for the unregulated greed of individuals to ‘abuse the system’, are in reality, as Harvey and Klein have written, intrinsic structural features.

In a 2008 lecture, Judith Williamson referred to our society as being one where a culture of denial dominated.⁴¹ Within this culture we actively seek to ‘unknow’ basic facts of our existence – Williamson explicitly focuses on the inability to discuss global warming. We can think of this active unknowing as being another example of the kind of cognitive locking, that, as the much paraphrased remark by Slavoj Žižek, has meant it’s been easier to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Day by day it seems that this denial, this unknowing, this cognitive locking, is loosening its grip. Now, after forty years, the “political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites”⁴² is revealing itself in all its blunt, brutal greed and venality. The hollowness of the rhetoric of freedom, choice and liberty reverberates. The internal contradictions and brutal economic reality of this system are now so publicly known through personal experience as to undermine the authority of the daily common sense pronouncements of ‘capitalist realism’ – nobody needs a degree in economics to see this anymore. What’s more, the various ways consent for this system was previously manufactured and bought (easy credit) can no longer deliver on the promise of paying tomorrow for pleasure today.⁴³

Lord Browne’s 2010 review of Higher Education funding and student finance, ‘Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education’, rehashes the illusion of perfect competition, the sovereignty of consumer choice and demand – its suggestion, that the block grant for teaching be abolished; its overwhelming belief, that social value can only be thought of in ‘economic terms’. In a scathing overview of the review⁴⁴, Stefan Collini made clear the catastrophic consequences and ruinous folly of further adopting the business ontology within higher education – referred to as the requirement to ‘meet business needs’.

In Collini’s analysis, the report represents a blueprint for a devastating attack on the public role of universities in our social and cultural life. That we are now at pivotal moment is clear for Collini: “What is at stake is whether universities in the future are to be thought of as having a public cultural role partly sustained by public support, or whether we move further towards redefining them in terms of purely economic calculation of value and wholly individualistic conception of ‘consumer satisfaction’.”⁴⁵ He goes on to show how the consequences for higher education couldn’t be clearer: “the most likely effect of Browne’s proposals [...] will be to bring about a much closer correlation between the reputational hierarchy of institutions and the social class of their student body [...] ‘Free competition’ between rich and poor consumers means Harrods for the former and Aldi for the later: that’s what the punters have ‘chosen’.”⁴⁶

As I noted at the beginning, events have overtaken this article. Initially it was set to highlight a blind spot in much of the art world’s critical discussion of the future of art schools. The aforementioned failure to grasp the fundamental, intrinsic need for a principled adherence to and argument for comprehensive values as being absolutely core in art school culture. Not just as an ideal, but intrinsic in practice. It was based on what increasingly seems a rather cosy idea, namely that we will in the foreseeable future have more than, say, ten art schools in Britain (just the blue chip ones?). However, the severity of the present situation and the starkness of the choices facing us, means that the imperative to assert the absolute core values of comprehensive education (free, universal access for all and a commitment to a thoroughly diverse body of students) is, now more than ever, unquestionable. The pernicious capitalist realism that has labeled this as a fanciful utopian impossibility needs to be shown for what

it is. David Harvey is quite clear about the kind of immediate, imperative choices that need to be made:

“What I think is happening at the moment is that they are now looking for a new financial set-up which can solve the problem not for working people but for the capitalist class. I think they are going to find a solution for the capitalist class and if the rest of us get screwed, too bad. The only thing they would care about is if we rose up in revolt. And until we rise up in revolt they are going to redesign the system according to their own class interests. I don’t know what this new financial architecture will look like. If we look closely at what happened during the New York fiscal crisis I don’t think the bankers or the financiers knew what to do at all, now what they did was bit by bit arrive at a ‘bricolage’; they pieced it together in a new way and eventually they come up with a new construction. But whatever solution they may arrive at, it will suit them unless we get in there and start saying that we want something that is suitable for us. There’s a crucial role for people like us to raise the questions and challenge the legitimacy of the decisions being made at present, and to have very clear analyses of what the nature of the problem has been, and what the possible exits are.”⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 Jones, K, *New labour: The Inheritors in Education in Britain 1944 to the Present*, Cambridge, Polity, 2003
- 2 Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, 2007, p. 16
- 3 Naomi Klein: ‘Wall St. Crisis Should Be for Neoliberalism What Fall of Berlin Wall Was for Communism’, *Democracy Now*, October 6th 2008 http://www.democracynow.org/2008/10/6/naomi_klein
- 4 Michael Corris succinctly pointed out how the internalisation of this logic creates a key flaw in student criticisms, “while complaints about poor provision are legitimate, these are often tinged with the value for-money mentality of consumers who aren’t satisfied with what they expect from their purchase. In this situation, it is all too easy for managers to use the complaints of students against teaching staff, and the ‘customer is always right’ culture does little to accustom students to the experience of robust criticism or demands for intellectual rigor, while the weary hypocrisy of passing students who should be failed is imposed by managers who value the income far more than the educational standards of the teaching staff.” *Art Monthly*, issue 302
- 5 Fisher, M, *Capitalist Realism*, Zero books, 2009, p.42
- 6 Rogoff, I, ‘Academy as Potentiality’, in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y* eds Nollert, A, Rogoff, I, Baere de, B, Dziewior, Y, Esche, C, Niemann, K and Roelstrete, D. Frankfurt, 2006
- 7 Maria Walsh makes this point very well in her contribution to *Art Monthly*’s special on education. She also counter intuitively, and interestingly, offers some reasons for why we should be optimistic about the changing face of art school.
- 8 Few independent reports seem to disagree upon the impact of fee increases within the humanities, specifically on the levels of class exclusion.
- 9 ‘Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network, 2009
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 For more information on the Office for National Statistics social-economic classifications of occupation (NS-SeC), see <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/classifications/current/ns-sec/index.html>
- 13 ‘Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network, 2009; it’s worth mentioning that about one quarter of the applicants do not state their SEC status, so there is a significant ‘unknown’ to these figures.
- 14 ‘Glasgow “posher” than Oxbridge’, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 18th December 2002 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2002/dec/18/accesstouniversity.highereducation>
- 15 “Art for a Few”, National Arts Learning Network, 2009
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 202.
- 20 “After the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1970s, the share of national income of the top 1% of income earners in the US soared, to reach 15% (very close to its pre WWII share) by the end of the century. The top 0.1% of income earners in the US increased their share of the national income from 2% in 1978 to over 6% by 1999, while the ratio of the median compensation of workers to the salaries of CEOs increased from just over 30 to 1 in 1970 to nearly 500 to 1 by 2000”. Ibid. p. 16.
- 21 Gove’s plans use the rhetoric of choice and freedom to disguise a policy that is highly anti democratic

and actively seeks to increase social segregation – an educational apartheid that wholeheartedly welcomes the end of commitment to ‘mixed education’. This was clearly witnessed during a select committee cross examination in July 2010, when he gleefully spoke of all Afro-Caribbean schools, Muslim schools, etc.

- 22 A highly inappropriate piece of populist jargon, there is no lottery about it – the ability to send your children to the best schools is clearly directly linked to capital – i.e. having enough money to live somewhere expensive.
- 23 Giroux, H. A, ‘Teachers Without Jobs and Education Without Hope: Beyond Bailouts and the Fetish of the Measurement Trap’ (Part 2), *truthout*, June 8th 2010 http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles.htm
- 24 Whether it is an inability or a refusal is worth considering. I’m reminded here of Dave Beech’s argument regarding the problems of the left in ‘Seizing The Reins Of Power’, *Art Monthly* issue 294.
- 25 I’m not thinking of a value to come with alternative programmes of social organisation here. That is a problem but the first step, as with Thatcherism in the late ‘70s, would be to create a powerful set of core ideals capable of motivating people. At present it’s largely a case of a getting behind a reactive defense. In art school culture, for instance, it would be far more persuasive to demonstrate the appeal of collaboration, collective work, dialogue and constructive dissent as ‘attractive’, as opposed to tribal defence of individualised practices and reputations.
- 26 Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding Ethics of Commitment Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso, 2008, p. 103. I’ve some time for Paul Bowman’s use of ‘ConDemned’ <http://infinitethought.cinestatic.com/index.php/5449/>
- 27 Fraser, N, ‘Feminism, Capitalism And The Cunning Of History’, *New Left Review* 56, March-April 2009 http://www.newschool.edu/uploadedFiles/Faculty/NSSR/Fraser_NLR.pdf
- 28 Power, N, *One Dimensional Woman*, Winchester, Zero Books. 2009, p. 30.
- 29 The epistemological uncertainty that appears to be simultaneously art education’s biggest handicap and best source for progressive reinvention.
- 30 Groys, B, “Education by Infection” in, Art school: (propositions for the 21st century) MADOFF, S.H., ed., 2009, p. 29
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 With some reservations, I would suggest during the ‘60s, when the class composition of British art schools underwent something of a ‘challenge’.
- 33 Quoted in Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding Ethics of Commitment Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso. 2008
- 34 Pragna Patel, from Southall Black Sisters, *Red Pepper*, 2003
- 35 Parry, B, ‘Signs of Our Times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha’s “The Location of Culture”’, in *The Third text reader: on art, culture, and theory*, eds Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, Ziauddin Sardar
- 36 Hassan, R, *The information society: A sceptical view*, Polity Press, 2008
- 37 As Mark E Smith muses on ‘Your Future our Clutter’ (2010).
- 38 The idea of a wholesale levelling out of cultural hierarchies has to be taken with a pinch of salt. I can’t see power relinquishing power that easily – it’s mutated for sure, but to say, pace class divisions, that it’s disappeared is self serving nonsense.
- 39 One coda: it’s important to be clear that SEC 4-7 students are not figured as inherently radical here, either in the history of British art schools or in any utopian imagined future idyll. There isn’t and never has been some pure potent chemical to be added to the mix and stepped back from. Indeed frequently they are, as a consequence of a poor national art curriculum, the most conservative students.
- 40 Jones, K, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present*, Polity Press, 2002, p. 165.
- 41 Williamson, J, ‘The Culture of Denial’, keynote lecture, Frieze Art Fair, http://www.friezeartfair.com/podcasts/details/the_culture_of_denial/
- 42 Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, 2007, p. 19
- 43 See Adam Curtis’ blog for a good overview: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2010/02/the_economists_new_clothes.html
- 44 Collini, S, ‘Browne’s Gamble’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32 No. 21. 4 November 2010 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Harvey, D, ‘The Crisis and the Consolidation of Class Power: Is This Really the End of Neoliberalism?’, *Counterpunch*, March 13/15 2009 <http://www.counterpunch.org/harvey03132009.html>

Comprehensive Education

The 1944 Education Act raised the school-leaving age to 15 and provided universal free schooling in three academically differentiated types of schools – streamed entry was based on “accident of innate ability”; selection at the age of eleven via the 11+ exam. Following the 1964 General Election, the Labour government instructed all local authorities to prepare plans for the creation of a common *comprehensive* education system of new schools, either by amalgamation of existing schools or by building new ones. Clyde Chitty, in 2002, reflected on differing conceptions of comprehensive education, past triumphs and mistakes, thus: “...many genuinely believed that a capitalist society could be reformed, and that the new comprehensive schools would be a peaceful means of achieving greater social equality – greater social equality in the sense that working-class children would be able to move into ‘white-collar’ occupations or move on to higher education.



Building Treorchy Comprehensive School, May 1964

Writing in 1965, for example, leading sociologist A.H. Halsey could begin a *New Society* article with the ringing declaration: ‘*Some people, and I am one, want to use education as an instrument in pursuit of an egalitarian society. We tend to favour comprehensive schools, to be against the public schools, and to support the expansion of higher education (Halsey, 1965, p. 13).*’ Other social reformers believed in the idea of the ‘social mix’ – the theory which anticipated the steady amelioration of social class differences and tensions through pupils’ experience of ‘social mixing’ in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of *Circular 10/65*’s definitions of a comprehensive school: ‘*A comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process (DES, 1965, P. 8).*’ ...



Building Treorchy Comprehensive School, May 1964

Apart from any other considerations, the emphasis on promoting ‘social equality’ or ‘social cohesion’ in a capitalist society had the undesirable, if not entirely unexpected, effect of setting up useful targets for the enemies of reform to aim at.”

‘The Right To A Comprehensive Education’, Second Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, Clyde Chitty, November 16th 2002

...for more interesting times

Benjamin Franks

The Politics of Postanarchism

Saul Newman

Edinburgh University Press, 2010. (pp.200. £65)

In 1994 the global apparatus of the neo-liberal economic order was solidifying, with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Association; and at the same time contestation arose, signalled by the Zapatista uprising. It was also the year that a small but significant book by a US academic, Todd May, was published, called *The Political Philosophy of Post-Structuralist Anarchism*. This book sought to update and renew the anarchist tradition, by highlighting the restrictive strategic and modernist features of traditional revolutionary thought, using some of the theoretical insights derived from poststructuralist thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

In the nearly two decades that followed, there has been a noticeable rise in interest not only in anarchism, but also in tracing the similarities and tensions between politically-engaged post-structuralism and anarchism. Amongst the most insightful, prolific and, as a consequence, influential postanarchist thinkers has been Saul Newman. His 2001 book *From Bakunin to Lacan* and his subsequent writings have done much to raise the profile of anarchist features of poststructuralism amongst academics, and the possibilities of fruitful engagement in poststructuralist theory for anarchists. In addition, academic publishers have published a variety of scholarly contributions that are avowedly postanarchist or include a major postanarchist current, such as: Lewis Call's *Postmodern Anarchism* (Lexington, 2003), Richard Day's *Gramsci is Dead* (Pluto, 2005), Uri Gordon's *Anarchy Alive!* (Pluto, 2007), many of the authors in Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, et al, collection, *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* (Routledge, 2009) and Nathan Jun's edited book *New Perspectives on Anarchism* (Lexington, 2010). Other volumes are expected to join them soon including Duane Rousselle and Sureyya Evren's long-awaited anthology *The Post-Anarchist Reader* (Pluto, 2011). Specialist academic journals too have published articles utilising, analysing or critiquing the methodologies and techniques of postanarchism, including a special issue of *Anarchist Studies* dedicated to postanarchism alone, which was edited by Newman. Contributions have also appeared online in 'zine format. Whilst a little short of a decade ago postanarchism was a 'cottage industry', to use Ronald Creagh's 2006 description, it has now developed into a small but significant section of the knowledge factory.

Readers of Newman's earlier works will be familiar with many of the key themes and arguments in *The Politics of Postanarchism*. It is a useful addition to the literature on four main grounds. First, it is a clear re-statement of Newman's version of postanarchism (with occasional reference to other formulations); second, it does apply postanarchism to contemporary events, such as the banking crisis (p. 28, p. 80), the surveillance state wrought by The War O Terror (pp. 29-30; p. 75) and the struggles around immigrant rights (p. 115, pp. 172-3); third, it situates postanarchism amongst recent theoretical developments such as Badiou's critique of the natural social principle against the artificial political principle (pp.110-11) or Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's autonomist account of the multitude (pp. 121-3). Finally, in keeping with Newman's goals, the book provokes the reader to assess the limits of anarchism (p.5), by searching for and highlighting *aporia* (inconsistencies and

contradictions that are core) to anarchism. In doing so, it handily also raises questions about Newman's own postanarchist presuppositions.

Newman's central contention is that anarchism is wedded to an enlightenment rationalist – and indeed positivist – account of knowledge, and to a fixed, essentialist account of the subject, in which, Newman claims, anarchists produce a Manichean split between, on the one side, the benign natural law or *social principle* (a form of anti-politics) and on the other the malign *political principle*, an unnatural order of power. The latter is associated with the state (p. 4). These classical anarchist assumptions are not only philosophically unsustainable (pp. 58-59), but also produce hierarchical political practice. The knowledgeable elite armed with vanguard knowledge leads the masses in confronting the state and leaves other micropolitical oppressions untouched. In seeking out the authoritarian moments in anarchism, Newman seeks to make an anarchist critique to anarchism (p. 51).

Thus, the first conflict Newman identifies in anarchism is that between its commitment to freedom versus the fixed essential self. If humans are essentially good, or prone or determined to a particular type of benevolent social relationship, this severely restricts human freedom to produce its own destiny. It also leads to an anti-politics, as such essentialisms lead to a view of the good coming from natural social harmony which the state disrupts or distorts.

Newman has made similar criticisms of classical anarchism's essentialism, and this has led to objections to this characterisation. Notable opposition to Newman's account of classical anarchism has come from a variety of sources: Sasha Villon, Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur, author(s) from South Africa's Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation, Alan Antliff and Nathan Jun. These are not explicitly addressed in this book. A dominant theme amongst many of these criticisms is that Newman (and other similar postanarchists) has misrepresented classical anarchists, as they were not united by an essentialist view of the human subject. Significant classical anarchists such as Errico Malatesta (*Life and Ideas*, p. 73) viewed the concept of 'natural harmony' as 'the invention of human laziness'. In addition, Peter Kropotkin – who Newman specifically cites as an essentialist (p. 36 and p. 38) – was clear that humans have anti-social instincts as much as social ones, and whilst Newman acknowledges this (p.39) – perhaps in part in unacknowledged reply to earlier critics – he nonetheless asserts a social essentialism on classical anarchism.

Newman's critics are not denying that there are some essentialisms in classical anarchism but they point out that where they do exist they are not universal and rarely core to anarchism in the way that Newman contends. Instead, the appeal to benign humanism are often a rhetorical ploy to either counter the social Darwinism which suggested that individuals were inherently selfish such that market relationships refereed by a strong state is the best mode for humankind, or to highlight that as biological creatures certain basic needs are not being met by capitalism.

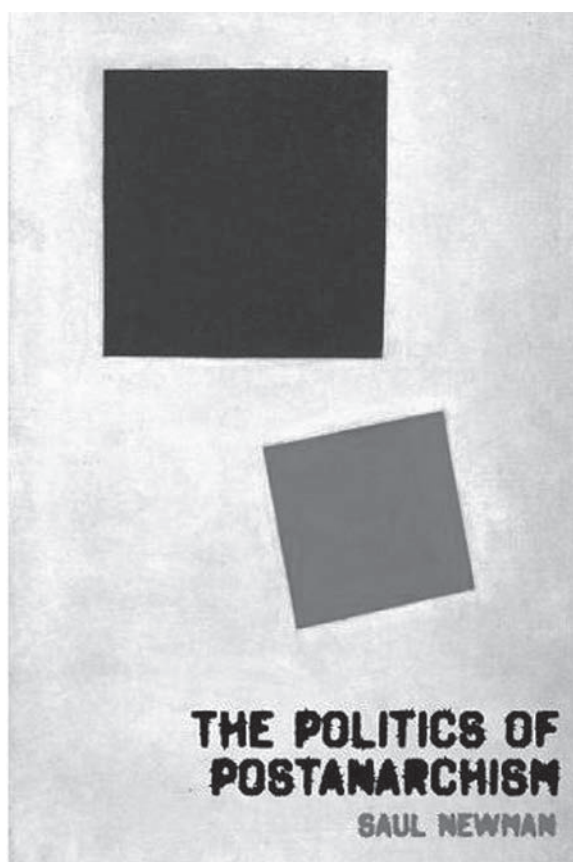
The apparent contradiction in anti-politics is similarly resolvable within the anarchist canon. Anarchism proclaims to be anti-political, says Newman, because it rejects the state, but it has to be involved in politics because it seeks new forms of anti-hierarchical organisation and interrelationship. This is no contradiction, but simply a different use of the word 'politics'. One is the standard definition concerning battles for state power – which anarchists

reject – and the other interpretation deals with wider constructions and distributions of power, which anarchists have always engaged in, from the unions and revolutionary syndicates to insurrectionary committees. There is evidence of anarchists in these organisations reflecting on how to avoid recreating hierarchies. Newman is right to point out that the state is not just a set of coercive institutions but is evident in the structure of our everyday social relationships. This is a view he finds in the (pre-post) anarchism of Gustav Landauer (pp.161-62), and the last great modernists, the Situationists Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem (pp.65-6), who borrowed it from the Marxian-thinker Henri Lefebvre. As a result, it is hard to see what postanarchism is bringing here which is not already part of anarchist self-reflection.

By seeking out the *aporia* in anarchism (even where they are not always present) Newman usefully acts as a spur to re-think postanarchism. Are there perhaps some inherent limits or conflicts in his postanarchism? Whilst sympathetic to Newman's account of anarchism/postanarchism sharing an open commitment to 'equal liberty' (pp.20-24) or 'equaliberty' (pp.144-45), namely the view that freedom and equality are mutually defining rather than in conflict, it does present a number of problems for postanarchism. It does, for example, suggest a fundamental or universal core to postanarchism, something which Newman's anti-foundationalism rejects. In addition, the principle of 'equality' is a fundamentally unstable and potentially contradictory concept. After all, appeals to equality suggest a shared value structure by which differing phenomena or agents may be assessed as 'equal', which is something that Newman problematises with his emphasis on singularities and rejection of moral norms (p. 7). As contemporary feminist critics have pointed out, demands for 'equality' suggest that there is some standard by which all other entities are measured by, such that gender equality is simply an appeal for women to measure up to the standard of 'man', and thus privilege the 'male'. Thus, appeals to equality are actually reassertions of a hierarchy of values and identities.

I am sympathetic to the main thrust of Newman's thesis – "to affirm anarchism's place as the very horizon of radical politics" (p.2) – though it is also slightly problematic, for it assumes that everyone shares the same horizon. It might instead be more accurate to see anarchism as 'a possible horizon' rather than the prime or sole discourse and practice of radicalism. The risk of such a clear, but singular, vision is that it potentially closes off routes of political solidarity or risks colonising other thinkers from distinctive radical traditions, claiming them as unconscious anarchists (see for instance p.168, p.176). Although Newman recognises some heterodox movements in Marxism, he places anarchism in opposition to Marxism (pp.11-12, pp.75-76), portraying it as a fundamentally statist and realist political movement. Despite rightly rejecting Leninism, Newman nonetheless adopts an almost entirely Leninist reading of Marx, which risks closing off the possibility of more fruitful engagement between anarchists and Marxists.

A further tension in Newman's work concerns postanarchism's location in relation to anarchism. By endorsing poststructuralist anti-essentialism, and a view of power/knowledge as contingent, constructed and situational, Newman suggests that postanarchism offers a substantive improvement on this form of radical politics, whilst at the same time wishing to suggest that post-anarchism is not such a transcendence. Newman views such claims to progress as being a fundamental part



of a Hegelian, modernist mindset that recreates hierarchy (p. 148 and p.153).

Newman states explicitly at critical junctures of the book that: “Postanarchism is not [...] an abandonment or movement beyond anarchism. On the contrary, postanarchism is a project of radicalising and renewing anarchism – of thinking of anarchism as a politics.” (pp. 4-5) and “Postanarchism is not a specific form of politics; it offers no formulas or prescriptions for change. It does not have the sovereign ambition of supplanting anarchism with a newer name”, but is rather a “celebration” of anarchism (p.181). This is a position that is consistent with Newman’s arguments against Modernist discourses of progress. However, such assertions seem inconsistent with his other claims that anarchism requires a substantive break, which postanarchism offers – “if anarchism is to remain relevant to political struggles today, it must construct new understandings of politics, ethics, subjectivity and utopia which are not grounded in essentialist or rationalist ontologies and which eschew guarantees of the dialectic” (pp.163-64) – and that postanarchism provides grounds to think of anarchism “in new ways” (p. 182).

Newman seems to suggest that postanarchism provides a way of refreshing or revitalising anarchism. This is an attractive project, but not one without a number of problems. The first is that whilst there is much to agree with in Newman’s account of postanarchism, it is hard to see, bar in its more academically sophisticated mode of expression, how it differs significantly from the internal critiques already part of anarchist and other radical traditions. Take, for instance, Newman’s account of the role of utopianism in anarchist thought, which, like so much of the book, is cogent and insightful. As Newman points out, utopias are not blueprints to determine action, but ways of critiquing present social forms as well as ways to inspire (pp.67-68, pp.138-39). Such an account of utopia one which was already significant in anarchism, drawing as it does from Georges Sorel and Kropotkin. Moreover, the idea that the utopian should be embodied in the practices of the here and now, such as contesting the state in our daily action (p. 163), sounds exactly like the principle of prefiguration – the means embodying the goal – which has been one of the main distinguishing features of anarchism since its earliest classical forms under Michael Bakunin and James Guillaume.

If these characteristics are already present within the classical anarchist canon and within contemporary (non-post prefixed) anarchist tradition, what does Newman’s postanarchism add that is new? It is, first, a welcome reassertion that fluid, anti-hierarchical practices are already a core feature of anarchism. Newman’s postanarchism also rightly highlights the ethical in radical politics, another longstanding feature of anarchism. Here, though, Newman cites Emmanuel

Levinas and the concept of the encounter. This posits that in dealing with others we unsettle the sovereignty of our ego and also disrupt others with whom we engage; in relation to others, we have therefore a “radical responsibility for the other” (p. 55). The encounter between academic post-structuralism might radically unsettle anarchism, but rather than produce new anti-hierarchical social relations, it might simply act to assert the sovereignty of the academic discourse. Radical discourses have gone this way before. Terry Eagleton laments that when Marxism encountered academe its trajectory was altered: Socialist analysis which was a resource “among dockers and factory workers ha[s] turned into a mildly interesting way of analysing *Wuthering Heights*” (*After Theory*, p.44). In this case the danger is that whilst poststructuralist engagements provide useful aids for encouraging anarchists to reflect on their practice, they might overcode anarchism into a discourse associated only with those located in particular educationally-privileged locations and thereby domesticate and dominate (like the reviled vanguard) radical activity. It is this fear that explains some of the hostility to postanarchism and poststructuralism in anarchist forums less centred on academe (see for instance libcom.org).

There are mitigating factors against this academic colonisation. Newman clarifies – and therefore democratises – some complex debates from within the realms of high theory, making them more accessible to the non-specialist reader. He deserves at least a pint for making sense of the Simon Critchley versus Slavoj Žižek dispute (pp. 113-15); for making the argument between Ralph Milliband and Nico Poulantzas clear and relevant (pp. 76-77), and for explaining and critiquing potentially obscure concepts such as Negri’s *constituent* and *constituted* power (pp. 87-89) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s post-socialism (pp.89-93).

Also attractive is Newman’s optimism, drawing from examples of militancy like the aforementioned Zapatistas, peasant and landless protection of the commons in Brazil, Peru and West Bengal and factory occupations in Europe (pp. 174-75). It is a refreshing change from discourses of defeat, retreat and retrenchment to hear a knowledgeable theorist propose “that an insurgent political space has already emerged, characterised by new experimental forms of political practice and organisation that are anarchistic in orientation” (pp. 167-68). If he is right it will make for more interesting times.

This article is based on the review that appeared in *Anarchist Studies* Vol. 16 No. 2 (Autumn 2010). Benjamin Franks is the author of *Rebel Alliances: The means and ends of contemporary British anarchisms* (AK Press, 2006) and co-editor of *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy* (Palgrave, due out October 2010).

Aesthetic Journalism in Practice

Manifesta 8 and the Chamber of Public Secrets

Maeve Connolly

In his recent review of Alfredo Cramerotti's *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*, Matt Packer notes that the term 'aesthetic journalism' is "alternately deployed throughout the book", recalling "the way that 'Relational Aesthetics' functions for Nicolas Bourriaud".¹ So it is used both to elaborate upon recent tendencies in art practice and, in a more polemical sense, to propose "a radical interaction yet unfulfilled". This comparison is appropriate, not least because both authors are curators, but while Bourriaud assumes familiarity with a number of artists and artworks considered as key, and largely avoids in-depth discussion of his philosophical and theoretical reference points, Cramerotti is clearly writing for a somewhat more diverse readership, encompassing media students and practitioners as well as artists, curators and art critics. Each chapter of *Aesthetic Journalism* features suggestions for further reading, in addition to the comprehensive list of "references and niceties" at the back of the book, going so far as to contextualise major art events. So, for example, Documenta is introduced as "an exhibition taking place in Kassel ever five years since 1955 [...] an event that helped to shape an idea of art not as an autonomous field, but as a practice investigating (and reporting) the social and the political via aesthetics".²

As this reference to Documenta suggests, the notion of art practice – and the art exhibition – as an arena for social and political investigation is not new. Cramerotti identifies "early patterns of aesthetic journalism" in the eras of Reformation and Enlightenment, before charting the rise of "art as social criticism" in the 1970s (exemplified by the work of Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler and the artists associated with Vanguardia) and contemporary practices (citing works by Laura Horelli, Renzo Martens, Alfredo Jaar, The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, among others). Cramerotti argues, however, that the more self-consciously journalistic turn evident in recent decades can be partly understood as a response to a crisis in traditional journalistic media. Before exploring the concept of aesthetic journalism further, it is interesting to note another aspect of Cramerotti's approach that is highlighted by Packer. *Aesthetic Journalism* includes a list of approximately twenty exhibitions between 2002 and 2005, focusing on artists who work with "the document, the archive, the report and the documentary style"³, including Documenta 11 and Manifesta 5 (2004), yet Cramerotti does not actually focus directly on curatorial practice. Despite this, it may be possible to infer his position through reference to his input as a member of the Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS), one of three curatorial collectives responsible for Manifesta 8, taking place from October 7, 2010 to January 9, 2011 in the region of Murcia, southern Spain.

Theorising 'Aesthetic Journalism' and the 'Documentary Turn'

Cramerotti's book is one of the first monographic studies dedicated to this identification of journalistic and documentary turns in contemporary art⁴, but it follows a number of relatively recent anthologies exploring similar territory. They include another Intellect publication, *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* (2007), edited by Gail Pearce and Cahal McLaughlin, featuring contributions from theorists Michael Renov and John Ellis, together with panel discussions and interviews with practitioners such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ann-Sofi Siden and Jane and Louise Wilson. A more direct emphasis on curatorial practice is apparent in *The Greenroom*:

Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art, edited by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (New York: Sternberg Press and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2008). This compilation of new and republished texts includes 'Documentary/Vérité' by Okwui Enwezor, framed as a response to criticism of Documenta 11.

These publications are preceded by an array of texts appearing in journals and catalogues.⁵ They include 'The Where of Now' by Irit Rogoff, a contribution to a book published by Tate on the occasion of the exhibition *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video* at Tate Modern in October 2004 – January 2005. Ostensibly concerned, like the exhibition itself, with perceptions of temporality, Rogoff's essay actually focuses on location, artistic labour and the emergence of a mode of art practice "that informs in a seemingly factual way, but at a slight remove from *reportage*."⁶ She finds evidence of this shift in a series of exhibitions and goes on to cite a number of examples, such as a two-channel video work by Laura Horelli entitled *Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan*, 2002-2003, shown at Manifesta 5. This is one of a relatively small number of contemporary examples of aesthetic journalism (eight in total) discussed by Cramerotti and it also features in my own discussion of "documentary dislocations" in artists' cinema⁷, indicating the register of biennial exhibitions in (re)producing a common curatorial and critical vocabulary.

Although Cramerotti identifies historical precedents for the journalistic or documentary turn, his theorisation of aesthetic journalism derives much of its coherence from a critique of news media production and reception that seems particular to the present curatorial moment. At one point he proposes that this mode of artistic practice can offer a point of orientation within an overwhelming "flux of information"⁸, and later makes reference to "the current trend of event reporting" that offers "no space for critical distance".⁹ According to Cramerotti, art and journalism are characterised by different temporalities of research, production and reception, with artists typically working at a slower pace than news media producers. He also notes proximities between art practice and fiction, stating that "while journalism reports, and fiction reveals, aesthetic journalism does both".¹⁰

The slower pace of artistic production and the questioning of truth claims through the exploration of fiction create the potential for critical reflection, at least in theory:

"The problem we have today is that a lot of journalistic art merely attempts to disseminate information in a way that is allegedly neutral; an artist is not better at producing a more transparent picture of the real than a journalist. What the artist can do better, instead, is to construct a self-reflective medium, which 'coaches' its viewers to ask relevant questions by themselves, instead of accepting (or refusing *tout court*) representations as they are proposed."¹¹

It is interesting to note the use of the term 'medium' here – perhaps Cramerotti may be referring to the fact that text, video and photography are employed both by journalists and many of the artists cited in *Aesthetic Journalism*. But it is impossible to conceptualise the 'medium' of aesthetic journalism without reference to the discursive and narrative contexts within which artworks are experienced. This is because the self-reflexivity that Cramerotti highlights as a potential property of this type of art practice is located (at least partly) at the point of reception, linked to the conditions of exhibition and circulation that differentiate contemporary art from print, online or TV news.

Curatorial Discursivity and Critical Reception

Although Cramerotti favours discussion of artworks over the analysis of exhibition-making, he is careful to specify the optimum conditions of reception for aesthetic journalism. He states; "Two aspects are equally important: for the author not be forced to adapt to the speed of the news industry, and for the spectator not to be required to accept or refuse it on the spot. Come and go in front of a representation at one's leisure".¹² In practice, however, the actual conditions of reception for an exhibition such as Manifesta 8 – particularly during the professional preview – bear little relation to this ideal. As with previous editions, hundreds of artists, curators, critics and students attended the preview, which took place over four days.¹³ While the accreditation process was hampered by technical glitches, the actual experience was marked by a sense of inclusivity – no obvious VIP areas or parties with restricted access – and generosity, with free bus transport from one venue to the next. Yet the organisation of the exhibition at fourteen venues, spread across two cities (an hour apart) necessitated a very tightly-scheduled programme, so that hundreds of visitors arrived at each venue together. It was difficult to view many video installations in their entirety let alone "come and go in front of a representation at one's leisure".¹⁴

The advance information for Manifesta 8 signalled a strong thematic emphasis on curatorial discursivity. This was apparent both in the selection of three curatorial collectives (the other two are Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum and tranzit.org) and the inclusion of various projects requiring audience interaction. During the preview, members of all three collectives organised events, talks and tours, so that those attending were sometimes constituted as participants, rather than observers. As several commentators have noted, critics routinely occupy a role similar to that of the embedded journalist¹⁵, not least because in practical terms art reviewers often depend, for access, information and even resources, on the very organisations and institutions that they are expected to critique. Perhaps more importantly, however, reviewers are also reliant on the networking opportunities offered by events such as the Manifesta professional preview, as a means to develop and maintain linkages in an era of increased competition. But this does not mean that a reviewer who follows the prescribed route, touring from venue to venue on the official bus, is prohibited from producing a critical response to an exhibition. Quite the opposite *might* in fact be true, because artists, curators and critics are capable of establishing and asserting self-consciously critical positions through an ongoing process of discursive production, which often involves the assertion of critical judgements (publicly or more informally) regarding events such as biennial exhibitions.

Teresa Gleadowe's review of Manifesta 8, one of two accounts published in *Art Monthly*, is particularly interesting in this regard because of its shift of critical focus towards the economic and political accountability of the Manifesta Foundation. Gleadowe emphasises that "Manifesta occupies a very particular place in the landscape of biennales brought into being in the past two decades [...] Launched in the early 1990s as a roving art event to be hosted in different cities around Europe, it evolved as a response to the political and economic changes brought about by the end of the Soviet Union and the consequent moves to European integration." Noting that "Manifesta has a more than usually



explicit agenda”, she goes on to point out that “its press material fosters the expectation that the financial contribution it seeks from its hosts – said to be 3.3m – will be amply recompensed in income from cultural tourism and in international positioning”.¹⁶ Gleadowe also states that the Foundation “has an interest in curatorial innovation” and although she does not elaborate on this point, the context of her discussion suggests an economic imperative for the thematic focus on curatorial collectivity. This could be one way of ensuring the attendance of visiting professionals, whose presence is presumably essential to “international positioning”. She concludes, however, that the Foundation largely failed to offer the appropriate curatorial and editorial support for Manifesta 8, leading to significant problems with exhibition texts, venues and installation.

CPS at Manifesta 8

Turning to the CPS catalogue contributions, Tirdad Zolghadr’s essay, ‘The Man Who Stares at Media: Remote Viewing of the Chamber of Public Secrets’, also offers a critique of the Manifesta project. Unlike Gleadowe, who pointedly cites facts and figures, Zolghadr adopts a self-consciously speculative position, describing himself as a “remote viewer” with limited knowledge of Murcia and also of CPS (whose activities he has encountered mainly through their website and publications). As though anticipating the extinction of Manifesta, he describes it as “belumbering the continent like a mammoth on the icy tundra. Now loudly laying claim to neighboring land masses in complete, sweet oblivion to the colonial connotations its appetites imply”.¹⁷ This critique is then developed through reference to journalism, as Zolghadr notes the longstanding complicity of journalists with colonial enterprise, citing Nietzsche on the arrogance of nineteenth century journalism:

“the newspaper steps into the place of culture, and he who, even as a scholar, wishes to voice any claim for education, must avail himself of this viscous stratum of communication which cements the seams between all forms of life [...] In the newspaper the peculiar educational aims of the present culminate, just as the journalist, the servant of the moment, has stepped into the place of the genius.”¹⁸

Zolghadr welcomes the interrogation of journalism that is potentially offered by CPS, in terms of its relation to the Manifesta project, but the task he seems to envisage is distinct from that undertaken by Cramerotti in *Aesthetic Journalism*. Zolghadr not only challenges the European tradition in which journalism is posited as “the conscience of civil society”, but also identifies Manifesta as an extension of this model. By contrast, Cramerotti seems – at least in part – to lament a decline in contemporary journalistic standards resources, while implicitly valorising an earlier era.

With ‘¿The Rest is History?’, CPS aim to contest the limits of the Manifesta project, primarily through the embrace of new media and information systems. So, for example, the

curators state that they “attempted to redirect Manifesta into a new situation, namely, a mutual dependence of other discourses and ‘systems’ – in this case, information systems”.¹⁹ This interest in systems was apparent in the development of projects across multiple platforms. In addition to organising exhibitions and projects at numerous sites in Murcia and Cartagena, CPS developed and commissioned works for print, TV, radio and the internet and two of the venues included media archives or hubs with access to documentation and contextualising material on the CPS website. But the website actually offered relatively little in terms of additional material during the preview, and development of projects across so many media platforms may have overstretched resources.²⁰

The practical problems cited by Gleadowe are significant, if only because they illustrate a possible blind spot within Cramerotti’s analysis. His endorsement of aesthetic journalism is partly founded, as I have suggested, on the assumption that artists have more time than journalists. He states; “time is what dictates the limits of present-day researching and reporting. Artists do not have to work within the deadlines of traditional news production, but can ‘investigate’ [...] At a slower pace to develop meaningful relationships with communities. Through the assistance of curators and an organisation such as Manifesta 8, artists have the means to infiltrate the public and private infrastructures and reveal new takes on past, contemporary and future issues”. As the case of Manifesta 8 demonstrates, however, both curators and artists can only work in this way if this ‘assistance’ is forthcoming.

As Gleadowe implies, the repurposing of a number of buildings in Murcia and Cartagena for cultural and social use – part of the funding arrangement with the hosts, as problematised above – might have contributed to technical problems and delays. But this does not easily explain the situation at the two museum venues used by CPS, in which projected videos at times suffered from poor image quality. In fact one of the most effective works, *AmnesiaLand* by Stefanos Tsivopolous, was devised in response to a site not previously used for contemporary art exhibition – the Casino in Cartagena. This was one of a relatively small number of works in ‘¿The Rest is History?’ to fulfil the potential of aesthetic journalism, as theorised by Cramerotti, through its fusion of fictional and documentary modes of address. In addition, while numerous contributions to Manifesta 8 employed a self-consciously ‘archival’ mode of display, *AmnesiaLand* was one of the few video installations to make effective use of – and clearly acknowledge – already existing archives.

Nostalgia for the Public Realm

So, to what extent does the CPS presentation at Manifesta 8 success in furthering the critique developed by Cramerotti in *Aesthetic Journalism*? In their primary contribution to the catalogue, CPS emphasise that they want to “search out and engender dialogues, placing them in the public realm, through the practices of media, film and documentary production, artistic research and aesthetic journalism”.²¹ CPS clearly conceptualise the public realm as aligned with, and dependent upon, diverse forms of cultural production and research. Yet there is also a sense that they are seeking to preserve – or perhaps reanimate – a relatively traditional model of the public sphere, aligned to specific forms of media production and consumption that are under threat, if not actually in decline;

“we need printed journalism and broadcasts to help us make sense of the world around us. The amount of administrative, cultural, political and financial processes that occur during our average day cannot be digested in any other way.”²²

From this perspective, ‘¿The Rest is History?’ might then be viewed partly as a nostalgic undertaking, particularly if nostalgia is understood

as an acknowledgement of loss. **It is too soon to know** if CPS actually succeeded in expanding Manifesta’s discursive networks and information systems – the only credible way to determine this would be to undertake a formal study of its reception. In the absence of such a study, the critical response already offered by commentators such as Gleadowe might at least prompt greater self-reflection on the part of the Manifesta Foundation, so that it may perhaps support (some) artists, critics (and curators) to work differently from journalists.

Notes

- 1 Matt Packer, ‘Book Review: Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing’, *Photography & Culture* Vol 3, Issue 3, November 2010, 364.
- 2 Alfredo Cramerotti, *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*, (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and Chicago University Press, 2009) 30.
- 3 Cramerotti, 84.
- 4 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss distinctions between ‘journalistic’ and ‘documentary’ fields and modes of practice. But while documentary is often defined, following John Grierson, as the ‘poetic treatment of actuality’, journalism could be said to assert a stronger truth claim, and has traditionally been more tightly regulated through professional organisations and codes.
- 5 Recent examples include John Douglas Millar, ‘Watching V Looking’, *Art Monthly*, October 2010, 7-10, and various contributions to Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon, eds., *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists’ Film and Video*, (Bristol: Picture This, 2006).
- 6 Irit Rogoff, ‘The Where of Now’, *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, eds. Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir (London: Tate, 2004) 85. Emphasis in original.
- 7 Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists’ Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and University of Chicago Press, 2009). Cramerotti’s research first came to my attention several months before the publication of *Aesthetic Journalism*, when I was invited by Bristol-based artist Daphne Wright to take part in a public discussion on her work in June 2009, which he organised as the curator of QUAD gallery in Derby, UK.
- 8 Cramerotti, 69.
- 9 Cramerotti, 104.
- 10 Cramerotti, 103.
- 11 Cramerotti, 30.
- 12 Cramerotti, 106.
- 13 I attended with a group of students on the MA in Visual Arts Practices (www.mavis.is) and my article is partly informed by class discussions, particularly with criticism students such as Joanne Laws, whose review of Manifesta 8 is forthcoming in *Afterimage*, January/February 2011.
- 14 Evidently, it is possible to experience Manifesta outside the frame of the professional preview. When I reviewed the exhibition at Donostia-San Sebastian in 2004 it had already been open for several months and I moved from one venue to another at my own pace, relying upon public transport and directions from strangers as well as Manifesta maps and signage. See Maeve Connolly, ‘Nomads, Tourists and Territories: Manifesta and the Basque Country’ *Afterimage: Journal of Media and Cultural Criticism*, 32.3, November/December 2004: 8-9.
- 15 Chris Fite-Wassilak, ‘The Hope for an Open Wound’ *CIRCA* 131, November 2010. http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5264&type=Issue131&ps=publish
- 16 Teresa Gleadowe, ‘Manifesta 8’, *Art Monthly* 341, November 2010, 22-23.
- 17 Tirdad Zolghadr, ‘The Man Who Stares at Media: Remote Viewing of the Chamber of Public Secrets’, *Manifesta 8*, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2010) 153.
- 18 Zolghadr, 155.
- 19 CPS, ‘¿The Rest is History?’, *Manifesta 8*, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2010) 127.
- 20 There is a possible parallel here with the situation of ‘old media’ producers (such as public service broadcasters, for example) struggling to provide content across multiple platforms.
- 21 CPS, 128-129.
- 22 CPS, 133.

The Housing Question Redux

Neil Gray

Militant Modernism

Owen Hatherley
Zero Books, 2009
978-1-84694-176-4

Where the Other Half Lives:

Lower Income Housing in Neoliberal World

Glynn, Sarah (ed)
Pluto Press, 2009
978-0-74532-857-7

Public housing is in a period of major decline. Long-term disinvestment – associated with an ideological shift towards the neo-liberal shibboleths of something called ‘the market’, fetishised as an abstract, uncontrollable, autonomous force – and private property have rendered the construction of new public housing virtually unthinkable at the level of governance. Housing costs are an ever-present concern, yet its socio-political relevance is often overlooked – even as housing costs, as a percentage of median income, have increased exponentially¹. The sub-prime mortgage crisis, and its disastrous repercussions in the global economy, put housing on the map again, but the reaction of neo-liberal governance has only been to deepen the ideology that caused the crisis in the first place.

In 1979, council housing represented just under a third of all Britain’s housing stock (Glynn p.25), and in Scotland, over half the population once lived in homes provided by the public sector (Glynn p.27). The regressive defamation of this everyday reality, and the naturalisation of home ownership as first preference in housing relates to a state-sponsored ideological offensive of major proportions. A recent article by Maya Gonzalez for *Endnotes*² explains how the ‘preference’ for home-ownership in the US was engineered by fiscal restructuring of the state in the 1930s. By the middle of the decade, the federal government had set up the mechanisms for the promotion of national economic growth through a flexible market for consumer credit. Credit both stabilised the economy and fuelled debt-driven economic expansion; a credit revolution that actively promoted economic growth based on the mass production and consumption of commodities. Central to the reproduction of labour-power, housing was *the* key commodity. New mortgage guarantees insured private lenders against loss, and established the use of long-term mortgages: the Federal Housing Association mortgage insurance programs established in the National Housing Act of 1934, and the Veterans Administration mortgage guarantee programs of 1944 privileged the expansion of the markets for home-improvement and for privately owned homes in the US³. These financial arrangements effectively entrenched the kind of debt-financing that helped derail public housing, prioritise private home ownership, and stimulate the commodity-economy. These policies of debt-driven expansion finally imploded in the sub-prime mortgage crisis.

In the UK, a key issue for Thatcher’s success in the Conservative election campaign of 1979 was the sale of council houses. The ‘Right to Buy’ scheme gave massive discounts for long-term council tenants to buy their rented properties, at the same time as it offered the promise of social mobility and a foot on the property ladder. By offering huge discounts on council homes, the state subsidised the sale of the better part of council housing stock in order to break up Labour-dominated estates and establish a distinct private sphere through which the values of the consumer/citizen could be established in working-class estates⁴. The sale of council housing was a key factor in the housing speculation that followed:



Right:
Hutchesontown
C: The Gorbals

a massive transfer of wealth from the public to the private domain. Building new homes for rent made no sense for councils if they could just be bought up on the cheap through ‘right to buy’. Loss of rent revenues through reduction of stock also impacted heavily on the maintenance of remaining council homes. Moreover, any money gained from sales was ring-fenced to pay off local housing debt. Years of disinvestment and ghettoisation have resulted in a negative cycle of stigmatisation with council housing routinely viewed as housing of last resort⁵. To the despair of the radical left, owner-occupation since the late 1980s has seemed a more assured way of improving many individuals’ standard of living than collective action. The sale of council housing is one of the most important material conditions underlying the advance of individualism, consumerism and neo-liberal ideology in the past two decades.

The Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010 represented another massive assault on social housing. The government announced a budget cut for the construction of affordable homes over the next four years of nearly 50%, from £8.4 billion to £4.5 billion⁶. Meanwhile, the system for managing council housing financing – the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system – is set to be replaced with an undisclosed ‘self-financing’ arrangement. Funding for a promised 150,000 new ‘social’ homes, it is proposed, could be raised by allowing Housing Associations to charge their tenants a new ‘Affordable Rent’ tenancy at 80% of the market rate. The principal of secure tenancies is also under threat. For new tenants, Government will give Councils and Housing associations powers to grant ‘fixed-term tenancies’ with a minimum time period of two years, abolishing the right to existing secure or assured lifetime tenancies. Government is also consulting on whether existing tenants should continue the right to a lifetime tenancy if they move. Social polarisation will be further cemented by allocating on the basis of those who are, “the most vulnerable in society and those who need it most”, reinforcing existing policy and further tarnishing the principle of social housing for all⁷. Meanwhile, Government proposes to reduce Housing Benefit by 10% for job seekers who have been out of work for more than 12 months. Unemployed people will have to make up the rent shortfall from the £65 they get on Job Seekers Allowance, even as almost half of those on Local Housing Allowance (for those renting privately) are already £100 a month short of what they need to pay the rent⁸.

Public and social housing is being attacked like never before, and much of it is justified by a campaign of vilification which judges the people who live in public housing, just as harshly as the

public housing itself. *Militant Modernism*, by Owen Hatherley, and *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower Income Housing in a Neoliberal World*, edited by Sarah Glynn, however affirm the benefits of public housing in quite different ways, but in ways that help provide a critical, progressive conjuncture if we think them both at once. At a time when the dogma of ‘no alternative’ is a neo-liberal commonplace – despite signs everywhere of that creed’s decadence – Hatherley’s excavation of ‘Socialist Modernism’ and Glynn *et al*’s affirmation of collective housing struggle offer primers for a different kind of future. *Militant Modernism* ranges widely, delivering perceptive insights across the historical avant-gardes, popular culture, Russian sci-fi modernism, Disurbanism, the ‘SexPol’ of William Reich, Brechtian aesthetics, and more besides. *Where the Other Half Lives* meanwhile, interrogates the present state of public housing internationally by way of varied contributions from France, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the US. For the purposes of this review, I want to concentrate on those elements in each book which consider housing and urban questions in the UK.

Militant Modernism

Owen Hatherley’s *Militant Modernism* attempts to resuscitate a radical modernism from its ossification within academia, the heritage industry, and the jaded discourses of ‘leftism’. Appearing as part of the *Zero Books* series, the title makes good on the imprint’s manifesto claim that “another kind of discourse – intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist – is not only possible: it is already flourishing”. A dedication to the Southampton City Council Architects Department, and a quote from John Ruskin’s *A Defence of the Idealists* (1853), frames the eclectic, but critical tone of a wide-ranging excavation of Utopia from the “futures ruins” – those architectural relics of modernism still extant in urban life.

Hatherley asks if the modernist impulse to ‘erase the traces’ – to destroy in order to create – can revive a once radical modernism that would certainly reject current attempts to replicate or ‘preserve’ aspects of its original intentions. Modernist conservation organisations like DOCOMOMO⁹, he argues, have granted Modernism museum status, but in doing so they have surrendered the radical heritage of modernism. As Pawley contends, this tendency meekly accepts Modernism’s “absorption into the art-historical classification system as a style...converting their once proud revolutionary instruments back into monuments for the delectation of the masses alongside the palaces of the ancient regime...” (p.5-6). Hatherley’s argument, however, follows Walter Benjamin, whose “destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and space is stronger than any hatred” (Cited, p.4). Benjamin’s desire to ‘live without traces’, manifested his desire to supersede the historical accretion of decadent bourgeois culture superbly evoked in the re-purposed image of Klee’s ‘Angel of History’¹⁰. His “dialectical, double-edged” acumen, aimed to blast open the capitalist dream world, with its proliferation of phantasmagorical commodities, “into an entirely new world; one shaped by the promises of the dream itself” (p.4). For the avant-garde modernisms, as for Benjamin, ‘erasing the traces’ meant “outrunning the old world before it has the chance to catch up with you” (p.5). For Hatherley, modernism had no interest in continuity: the shift from 19th century encrustation to the stark, unfinished concrete wall was “brutally short and sharp”; not merely progression, but “an interruption, a rupture, a break with the continuum altogether...” (p.6)

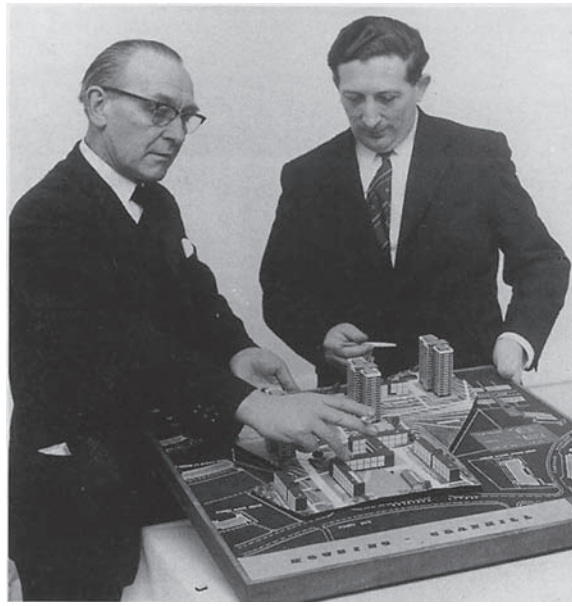
Militant Modernism was written with the coda “that the Left Modernisms of the 20th century

continue to be *useful*: a potential index of ideas, successful or failed, tried, untried or broken on the wheel of the market or the state” (p.13). Even in their ruinous state, suggests Hatherley, they offer “spectral blueprints” (p.126): alternatives to the neoliberal dogma that ‘there is no alternative’. Hatherley’s ‘nostalgia for the future’ resides in his reflection on modernist architecture as the radical remainder of the more progressive aspects of social democracy: the once futuristic walkways, precincts and high-rises of modernism, even in their dilapidation, engender a critique of the conservatism, and inequality reproduced through contemporary planning and architecture. What remains of Council Housing and the NHS are the vestiges of that ‘Eldorado for the Working-Class’ envisioned by Aneurin Bevan and others. For Hatherley, these contested remains of modernism represent an epochal moment when the working-class got ideas above their station. The worth of his *untimely* thesis lies in its unfashionable determination to consider the more radical moments of modernism dialectically. With a nod to Brecht and Eisler, he points us ‘Forwards! Not Forgetting’.

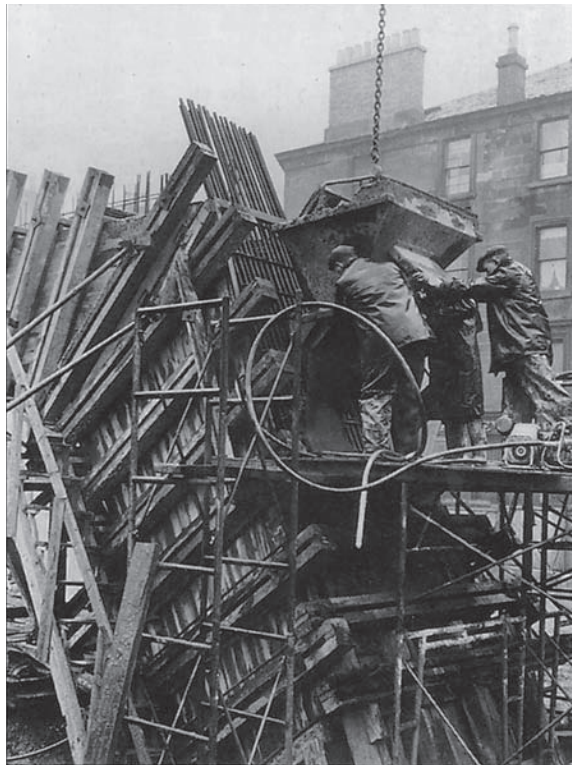
When the Situationist Internationale (SI), developed the theory of the *dérive* (“a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society; a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”¹¹), they updated techniques from the Surrealists, and cultivated an urban critical praxis as a means to critique the Haussmanisation of Paris and the *ideology* of urbanism¹². They thus sought out the labyrinthian alleyways of old Paris where Hausmann’s hand had no dominion; where odd corners, the working-class, and worn surfaces could still afford to exist. But, for Hatherley, the SI were prone to nostalgia, and for him the modern *dérive*, in a UK context, would have to take place among the concrete walkways of the 1960s (p.11), rather than the quaint streets of Victoriana, which might be the perverse analogue to those Parisian zones investigated by the SI. The contention is debatable: the *dérive* is a mode of experimental critical enquiry, and the point is surely that *everything* must come under critique in a society dominated by capitalist relations. However, Hatherley’s argument generates a stimulating eulogy to the *New Brutalism* – a harsh architectural interlude within modernism – that presents a hypothesis which is original and provocative.

Brutalist architecture took its name from the French term *breton brut*: raw reinforced concrete, cast in rough, unfinished form; while the term *The New Brutalism* derives from a Reyner Banham book on the architectural movement. The buildings of New Brutalism fetishised “hardness, dynamism, scale and rough edges” (p.17), and were informed by the advanced urban industrial landscapes of the UK; the most developed industrial nation in the 19th century. The return to pre-industrial arcadia, evoked in the phrase ‘An Englishman’s Home is his Castle’ is both patriarchal absurdity, and retro-feudal myth. As Hatherley notes, a ‘castle’ intimates a functionalist fortress, not a Mock-Tudor home in suburbia. A closer analogue is a high-rise modernist housing estate like Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar, London. Hatherley is at pains to stress that there is no pristine return. Britain’s role in the brutal industrial revolution made it an “industrial island machine” (Cited, p.20) whose Edenic contact with ‘the soil’ was irrevocably ruptured. Vorticism, which shared ideas with cubism and futurism in the mid-1910s, understood this new reality well, setting itself apart from the Futurists’ romantic veneration of the machine age (developed from the point of view of ‘primitive’ Italian rural life). Vorticism, in contrast, had been “warped, ‘modified’ by the presence of the machine from birth” (p.23). Wyndham Lewis’s famous riposte to the Italian Futurist, Marinetti, captures this particular strain well: “you are always on about these driving belts, you are always exploding about internal combustion. We’ve had machines in England for donkey’s years, they’re no novelty to us” (p.24).

While Vorticism failed to stamp its presence on everyday life, effectively wrapping up with the onset of World War I, the *New Brutalism* was



Top left:
Councillor David Gibson, Housing Committee Convenor of Glasgow Corporation (left) and George Bowie, Chief Architect of Crudens Ltd.



Bottom left:
Hutchesontown C, concrete pouring, main columns.

a product of a Social Democratic institution (London’s metropolitan government in its changing guises: LCC, GLC) and had a chance to influence the quotidian through (limited) architectural commissions. *New Brutalism* regarded itself as the *real* fulfillment of modernism’s initial radical impulses, and in tracts like ‘Criteria for Mass Housing’ opposed itself to the established practice of the ‘classical’ modernists of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). ‘Angry young London architects’, like Alison and Peter Smithson, were immersed in the problem of producing architecture of everyday use-value for the proletariat, at the same time as they pursued ‘shocking’ avant-garde techniques in ‘bloody minded’ architectural form. Concrete manifestations of the Smithson’s theory of ‘streets in the sky’ were realised in the Golden Lane project, and the Robin Hood Gardens estate. They saw themselves as, “building for the socialist dream, which is something different from complying with a programme written by the socialist state” (p33). For Hatherley, Brutalism was defined in some relation to the pop, sex, and glamour of its times. In one memorable passage, Hatherley pays homage to Pulp’s “ten minute fantasia”, ‘Sheffield: Sex City’, in which the concrete lines and walkways of Park Hill are imbued with a sense of mesmeric eroticism, finally climaxing in a collective orgasm on Park Hill at 4.13 am (p.37). The Barbican complex, meanwhile, is “as mysterious and attractive as a JG Ballard heroine” (p.34), while Eros House is noted as a reminder of the “strangely lubricious” (p.36) tone that creeps into the aesthetic of Brutalism. JG Ballard’s *Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, and *Concrete Island* have covered similar territory before, but Hatherley’s account adds a particularly *architectural* slant to the popular, everyday conjuncture of flesh and concrete, adding a cultural and aesthetic dimension largely absent from accounts of public housing.

For Hatherley, the remainig ‘cities in the sky’ are persistent vestiges of socialist modernism, a modernism now being dismantled at frightening

speed through urban development projects that routinely mask the real class content of gentrification through the utilitarian euphemism of ‘regeneration’. Strangely, for a polemic so firmly wedded to notions of radical rupture (‘erasing the traces’) the concept of *creative destruction*, the Schumpetarian mantra for neoliberal modes of devaluation and ‘renewal’, appears only latterly. Even when this rhetoric was firmly wedded to municipal socialism, as with Glasgow in the 1960s (the ‘shock city’ of the modernist housing revolution), the process and result was ambivalent to say the least. When David Gibson, Glasgow’s post-war ‘housing crusader’ (“arguably the most remarkable of Western Europe’s post-war municipal housing leaders”¹³), worked with engineer Lewis Cross to develop a programme of house building in Glasgow, their “extreme concern for output” was driven by the maximisation of ‘productivity’. They eagerly embraced ‘package-deal’ housing contracts in a process of ever diminishing returns in terms of quality. In the 1960s, under their leadership, high-rise flats made up nearly 75% of all completions compared to less than 10% in all other post-war years: this period marked “the most concentrated multi-storey drive experienced by any city in the UK”¹⁴. Cross’s crude utility was notorious. One planner said of him: “He had no conscience, no soul, no heart – just a machine for producing numbers!”¹⁵. Of course, there was a context for this ‘no-holds-barred’ productivity. The post-war housing crisis risked causing major social unrest. The ‘numbers game’ was fought out by both major parties in electoral competition. As well as easing working-class discontent in a period of near full employment, investment in public housing (reproduction) eased upward pressure on wage-bargaining at the level of production¹⁶.

These arguments shouldn’t detract from some of the gains that were made in eradicating the worst of tenement slum housing and preventing more overspill to the ‘new towns’, but a one-sided defence of socialist modernism borne from its most avant-garde tendencies fails to account for the rather more banal conditions of most post-war public housing. Meanwhile, only latterly does Hatherley mention the working-class people who live in the kind of blocks he lauds. He is right to note that tenants frequently want to stay in council flats, despite virulent campaigns of defamation waged on public housing. But his argument that tenants like the “views and the open space” (p.42) is insufficient even if it does express a moment of truth that detractors rarely acknowledge. One flat in a block may be suffused with light, and benefit from fantastic views; another in the same block might lie in the shadow of the building, be prone to damp, and have a less than glorious perspective. Depending on what is being allocated, in a vastly reduced market, it’s a bit of a lottery. Another explanation might be that those people who want to remain in public housing are often being offered an *even worse* option in ‘stock transfer’ regeneration packages. Above all, public housing remains the cheapest option¹⁷, and wanting to remain in council housing is a thoroughly pragmatic and common-sense decision. The widespread rejection of ‘stock transfer’ from Council Housing to Housing Associations across the UK has shown that tenants have a healthy distrust of hyperbolic ‘regeneration’ rhetoric¹⁸.

Hatherley’s tribute to militant modernism provides a stirring counter-narrative to stigmatizing discourses, but at times his argument founders on an outlook that privileges the aesthetic over a deeper analysis of the role of working-class antagonism in securing public housing, and the constitutive role of economics in determining outcomes in the built environment. As Frederic Jameson once observed, “Of all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship”¹⁹. For a book about ‘socialist modernism’, it is surprising how little discussion of capital there is – even accounting for an understandable rejection of vulgar Marxian economics. While Hatherley’s book sheds new light on many cultural aspects of militant modernism,

Sarah Glynn *et al's* substantive and empirical account of public housing in *Where The Other Half Lives* helps fill in some of the aporias in his account. *Where The Other Half Lives* can't match the imaginative vigour of *Militant Modernism*, but it does benefit from situating itself very much from within the perspective of collective class struggle in housing.

Everyday Modernism

"Public ownership allowed for a municipal form of collective control, took both the land and housing out of the property market, boosted the role of elected local councils and provided a decent home at affordable rents for more than a third of the population by the late 1970s, dramatically reducing the social power of capital and the disciplinary role of rents and mortgages in the labour market.

– Stuart Hodgkinson²⁰

Hodkinson's appraisal of public housing as part of a great account of housing privatisation in *Where The Other Half Lives* does a good job of summarising its positive role in countering the tyranny of private rent, even if ambivalence remains, for this author at least, over "the role of elected local councils" in the ownership and management of public housing. As well as a bulwark against rent hikes, municipal housing has also been an "expedient service", obfuscating the failings of the private market. Glynn cites Peter Malpass who has argued that state intervention in council housing has played a significant *supporting role* for the private sector by supplying needs not met by the market, securing government contracts for the construction industry, and withdrawing when housing construction becomes more profitable for the private sector (p.23-24). Nevertheless, Hodgkinson's summary of the social *benefits* of public housing provides an important rejoinder to a dominant narrative of stigmatisation. As Glynn observes, an emphasis on the continuity of capitalist control of the housing market risks obscuring the role of working class struggle in securing affordable homes. She cites a Community Development Project report in 1976 which contrasted "the political struggle of the working class to establish a socialised form of housing which recognised the right of everyone to a decent house at a reasonable cost", to the political 'Right' who "have always tried to contain development of council housing by narrowly defining the purposes for which it is to be provided, and creating an alternative to it more closely related to their interests" (p.24).

While Hatherley's version of militant modernism tends to reify the 'roles' of specialists in modernist housing (architects, planners, artists, film-makers, etc), *Where the Other Half Lives* emphasises the role of collective working-class agency in obtaining decent, affordable housing. This agency was borne from necessity. In 19th century *laissez-faire* capitalism, the ruling classes believed it was neither right nor necessary to intervene in housing markets. Until after World War I, nine out of ten households rented their home from private landlords, and rack-renting and slum conditions were endemic. By 1917, as the Scottish Royal Commission acknowledged, there was more than enough pre-war evidence to show "the inability of private enterprise to provide houses for the working-class". All of this is widely known, and the slum conditions of the period have been detailed extensively. More important is the antagonistic response of the working-class to these conditions, and the reaction this elicited from government. The Industrial Unrest Commission of 1917, for instance, recorded that slum housing had become an important source of social tension; while the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland conceded that, "Before the war, the demand for better housing had become articulate; to-day, after three years of war, it is too insistent to be safely disregarded any longer" (p.15-17).

The 'threat from below', expressed in powerful tenant protests in the 1910s, lay not only in their immediate impact but in their relationship with an increasingly powerful labour movement. Just as history demonstrates the inability of the



market to provide decent housing for a large section of population, it also shows that tenants' organisations have been pivotal in securing better housing and rent control legislation. The Glasgow rent strike of 1915 is a celebrated example, which Glynn gives detailed attention (p.283-290). The rent strike arose from profiteering rent rises during the war. As workers crowded into Glasgow to take up jobs in munitions factories and engineering and shipbuilding works, housing supply became scarce and overcrowded. Private landlords capitalised on this situation by raising the rents. The resultant anger of tenants was organised through work-gate meetings and through groups of women in the tenements who fought evictions, went on rent strike, and organised mass demonstrations. A government inquiry was set up, but the landlords' response was to *raise* the rents again, and to take eighteen tenants to small debt court. A demonstration of thousands, including all the men from five shipyards and an ordnance works, threatened a general strike and the case was dropped. With strikers still out after eight days, the government conceded and froze rents at pre-war levels.

Housing campaigners continued to apply pressure on government at the same time as workers fought for better conditions. By 1919, the threat of revolution, if not revolution itself, gave rise to the Government bringing tanks and soldiers to George Square in order to quell workers' demonstrations (backed by widespread strike action) for a shorter working week. When Lloyd George debated the 1919 Housing Bill in Cabinet, he argued: "Even if it cost a £100 million pounds, what was that compared to the stability of the state" (p.287). Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Local Government Board told the House of Commons, "the money we are going to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution" (ibid). From the point of view of government and business, investment in housing was necessary to defuse political agitation, but the reforms wrung out of the government in the Housing Acts of 1919 and 1924 were hugely significant gains nonetheless. Threat proved itself. As Glynn notes, there was also a growing awareness on 'Red Clydeside' that rent would have to be found from wages. Questions of reproduction were being linked directly with those of production, with women playing a decisive role in working-class composition at the time. As surplus capital is increasingly invested in urban landscapes rather than industry and manufacturing, the lessons of the 1915 Rent Strike at a reproductive as well as productive level are extremely prescient today.

For Glynn, at the heart of today's housing crisis lies "the prioritisation of the house as investment rather than as home, that is, of its exchange value over its use value"²¹. Speculation in housing, assisted by decades of deregulation in banks and building societies, alongside the distribution of 'soft' mortgage deals, has led to enormous price rises, and until recently, the promise of high returns. This in turn led to more speculative activity, further exacerbating the problem of spiralling rents. However, as Glynn points out – and as the differing US and UK contexts briefly outlined in the introduction show – there is nothing inherently natural about home-ownership. Swedes, Germans, Swiss and Dutch people of all classes still live in good quality public housing, while in the UK many people have chosen to live in public housing for a range of reasons including security of tenure, affordability and size of home. However, with the onset of Thatcherism, private home ownership began to dominate, with council housing increasingly under-funded and

stigmatised, just as private home ownership was both subsidised and eulogised through right-to-buy. Disinvestment and poor management have since resulted in council housing that has come to be seen as a residual second choice for those unable to afford their own home (p.26). As Glynn notes, such systemic inequalities are crudely ignored in the resultant false choice between degenerated council housing and regenerated 'social' housing.

Glynn's purview suggests other histories unrealised. In the post World War II reconstruction, Aneurin Bevan, as Health Minister in charge of Housing, offered a "glimpse of a socialist vision" – housing as a universal public service, just like the National Health Service (p.20-21). Bevan's redefinition of the Housing Act in 1949 removed "for the Working Classes" from the Act's title, and his conception of housing, located firmly within Labourite Keynesian principles of equitable redistribution, was one where good quality homes in mixed communities would be built by local authorities for people of all backgrounds. Bevan failed to nationalise housing, but he did ensure that four-fifths of the country's new homes were provided by Local Authorities at a quality standard still recognised today (p.22-23). Post-war economic restraints, the prioritisation of foreign policy and defence, and the scale of damage done to Britain's housing stock during World War II, meant that Bevan's hopes for quality universal housing provision were quashed by the realpolitik of the 'numbers game'. But the scale of ambition in his proposals are striking in comparison to contemporary demands for the 'Fourth Option' in housing (direct investment as an alternative to the three options of 'stock 'transfer' of council housing to Housing Associations, PFI schemes, and control by Arms Length Management Organisations²²).

In fairness, the less than inspiring demand for a 'Fourth Option' is an index of the current status of Council Housing amongst a raft of public-private options – signified, in the parlance of 'regeneration', by 'social' not 'public' housing – that threaten to engulf public housing in a wave of privatisation. These institutional co-ordinates are, of course, as much a heritage of 'the Left' as they are of 'the Right', as witnessed by the catalytic role the Labour Party have played in prosecuting neoliberalism. In this context, Glynn's criticism of neoliberalism, central to her overall argument, is in certain respects flawed. For instance, she argues that, "Neoliberalism, as the name implies, is based on a return to the ideas of free-market liberalism that predominated before the development of the welfare state and the Keynesian mixed economy" (p.9). Further, she asserts that neoliberalism, "dismantling the regulatory and distributive structures of the Keynesian mixed economy" (p.38), is diametrically opposed to anything that interferes with capital accumulation. However, it is important to realise that neoliberalism is profoundly *assisted* by the state, which under neoliberal conditions pro-actively regulates the planning and institutional landscape *on behalf* of neoliberal accumulation strategies.

As Foucault insisted, power is *productive*. Cuts in state budgets are also opportunities for capitalist growth in former state sectors. It would be better to theorise the neoliberal state, along with Hardt and Negri, as "not really a regime of unregulated capital, but rather a form of state regulation that best facilitates the global movements and profits of capital"²³. Neil Smith usefully elaborates on this point, framing the roots of neoliberalism in the 18th century liberal assumptions of Locke and Smith – e.g. the free exercise of individual self-interest leads to the optimal collective social good, private property is the foundation of this self-interest, free market exchange is its ideal vehicle. Twentieth century US liberalism (Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, JF Kennedy), emphasising social compensation to counter the excesses of capitalism, was not so much a misnomer as a re-appropriation of liberal terms in an attempt to *regulate* their sway, but by no means to break their original axioms. Contemporary neoliberalism "represents a significant return to the original axioms of liberalism" but this time galvanised by 20th century liberalism, resulting in "an

unprecedented mobilisation not just of national state power but of state power organised and exercised at different geographical scales”²⁴. Henri Lefebvre’s conception of the State Mode of Production (SMP) is also useful here. For Lefebvre, the SMP is intimately bound up with state productivism, whereby the state assumes responsibility for ensuring capitalist growth. The SMP thus provides a means to understand the continuity of capitalism through Western liberal democratic models such as social democracy, Fordism and Keynesianism. Through the SMP, social democratic forms are directly inscribed into the state form, serving as a crucial fulcrum and legitimising tool for state productivism²⁵. But as Benjamin Noys recently wrote, we miss the point if we simply say that neoliberalism is as statist as other governmental forms. Drawing on Foucault, he argues that, “the necessity is to analyse how neoliberalism creates a new form of governmentality in which the state performs a different function: permeating society to subject it to the economic”. In the words of Foucault, Neoliberalism intervenes on society so that competitive mechanisms “play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of the society by the market”. Thus we move from “a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state.”²⁶

The state thus needs to be conceptualised as a demoted but *active partner* in neoliberal accumulation strategies, and this necessitates a more critical position to social democracy than Glynn allows. This has serious consequences for the way change is conceptualised. As Glynn acknowledges, one of the main reasons for the atrophying condition of council housing in the UK has been grass-roots reliance on the Labour Party, with its emphasis on parliamentary socialism. This adherence to the Labour Party and the state is in contrast to many European socialists who were more wary of state involvement, setting up independent tenants organisations to advance their claims (p.29). The current situation in the UK, where tenants sit on Housing Association committees with the landlords, is indicative of a situation where tenants have been fully incorporated into the management structures of private companies, surrendering whatever independence they had into the bargain²⁷. While Glynn is deeply critical of these developments, an inadequate theorisation of the complicity of social democracy in the neoliberal conjuncture puts her at risk of falling behind her own analysis, and eliding a self-critical conception of where the new methodologies for radical housing change may arise. However, despite these concerns, or perhaps even because of them, Glynn *et al*’s contribution provides an excellent overview of the housing debate as it currently stands.

Summary

In the introduction to the recent collection of writings by the Situationist International (SI) – *The Situationists and the City* – Tom McDonough argues that what is important about the SI is not the plans they produced in their ‘architectural interlude’ (1957-62), but their critique of urbanism and their challenge to its very premises and ways of thinking. Resisting the viewpoint that the SI had some interesting ideas but rarely put them into practice, McDonough suggests that the most compelling moments of SI theory are precisely those ideas which express a radical resistance to incorporation and assimilation into the mainstream histories of the 20th century and the historical neo-avant-gardes²⁸. Borrowing heavily from Henri Lefebvre, the SI set about a radical critique of functionalism and modernisation in planning and architecture. Urbanism was seen as the *very technology of separation*, and modernist architecture, for them, lay somewhere between the barrack and the prison. As Guy Debord wrote in 1967, “The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for moulding its own territory, which constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this



project. Urbanism – ‘city planning’ – is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment”²⁹.

Even if a “certain utopian irresolution” (McDonough p.16) hung over the SI project of unitary urbanism, their critique of functionalist planning as a concrete expression of the hierarchical organisation of advanced late capitalism casts a long shadow over the housing question as a discrete and specialist mode of inquiry. Hatherley, in a positive review of Glynn’s book, hints at a possible resolution when he asks if we can ever regard council housing as *our* architecture, or rather, “an architecture we defend as best we can for want of something better”³⁰. Defending council housing, just like defending all those other state institutions currently being attacked by ‘The Cuts’, risks obscuring all the cuts that have preceded the current ones, and hiding the incorporation of social democracy into Fordist/ Keynesian modes of state productivism on behalf of capital. What we defend has already been cut, and this history, and those who sanctioned it, must be recognised. However, Hatherley’s point leads us to certain unavoidable realities. We defend Council Housing, education (“the sausage factory”³¹), the NHS, welfare provision, transport services, etc, because of solidarity, and because if we don’t the options are even worse. But in doing so we risk delimiting the parameters of struggle – only talking about what the telly talks about. These ‘minimum’ demands are necessary, and Glynn’s book lays some of them out very well, but without ‘maximum’ demands (the radical construction of a new world) the claims of the present risk being defined by the limited parameters of a circumscribed past.

The SI have received sustained critique over the years³², but their refusal of utopian project building, following Marx’s aversion to formulating abstract schemes within capitalist relations, led them to a position whereby revolution was viewed as the most exemplary critique of human geography; and the riot the most refined critique of urbanism (p.28-29). If that sounds implausible in these austere times, it’s worth remembering – as Glynn’s history of council housing shows – that many of the reforms of the past have emerged from the existence, or threat, of revolutionary activity backed by sizeable working-class movements.

Notes

- 1 “In the late nineteenth century the typical mortgage taken out by a skilled worker would take ten to twelve years to pay off. Now the standard length of a mortgage is twenty-five to thirty years”. ‘The Housing Question’, *Aufheben magazine*, #13, 2005: <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-housing-question>
- 2 This brief summary can do little justice to an excellent article. Gonzalez, Maya, ‘Notes on the New Housing Question: Home Ownership, Credit and Reproduction in the US Post-war Economy’, *Endnotes*, # 2, April, 2010: Misery and the Value Form: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/3>
- 3 See the graph in Gonzalez’s article for an indication of the sharp incline in homeownership rates after these housing credit was made widely available. Ibid.
- 4 For a good overview of housing in the UK context, see, ‘The Housing Question’, *Aufheben magazine*, #13, 2005: <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-housing-question>
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Gillman, Blake. *Inside Housing*, 27th October, 2010. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/housing-management/spending-review-is-assault-on-tenants/6512224.article>
- 7 For a summary of the proposed changes, see, Dept for Communities and Local Govt, 22nd November 2010, ‘Local decisions: a fairer future for social housing’. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/1775586.pdf>
- 8 Stop Cuts – Invest in Council Housing, Defend

Council Housing Briefing, August, 2010. <http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/>

- 9 International Committee for the Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modernist Movement (DOCOMOMO).
- 10 See ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, Pimlico, 1999.
- 11 See, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/1.definitions.htm>
- 12 “The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding its own territory, which constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism – ‘city planning’ – is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular décor”. Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone books, p.121.
- 13 Glendinning, Miles and Muthesius, Stefan, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, Yale University Press, 1994, p.220
- 14 Ibid, p.224.
- 15 Ibid, p.226.
- 16 ‘The Housing Question’, *Aufheben magazine*, #13, 2005: <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-housing-question>
- 17 View comparative graph between local authority and Housing Association rents, 2001-2008. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/ihstory.aspx?storycode=6508126>
- 18 Defend Council Housing website. http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/dch_novotes.cfm
- 19 Jameson, Frederic, *The Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, p.5.
- 20 Hodgkinson, Stuart, ‘From Popular Capitalism to Third-Way Modernisation: The Example of Leeds, England’, in, Glynn, Sarah (ed), *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower Income Housing in a Neoliberal World*, Pluto Press, 2009, p.99.
- 21 Glynn, Sarah (ed), *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower Income Housing in Neoliberal World*, Pluto Press, 2009, p.40
- 22 See Defend Council Housing website: http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/dch_stockoptions.cfm
- 23 Hardt, M and Negri, A, *Multitude*, Penguin, 2006. p.280.
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Previous page and left: Photographs by Colin Woon from the Campaign To Save Robin Hood Gardens.